



Stories vs. Data: The Rematch

A 1980 study reminds us that numbers are no match for a strong narrative.

(Editor's note: We received so many comments on the December article, "Stories or Data: Which Makes the Stronger Case?" that we're revisiting the subject this month. To read this article, [click here](#).)

"Sample bias" may sound like arcane terminology belonging to research nerds, but it's a phenomenon you experience almost daily. Consider the last time you bought strawberries.

If you picked up a shrink-wrapped box, suspected that those bright red beauties on top were hiding some bruised losers underneath, and decided *not* to buy, you resisted sample bias. (Or, as the nerds would say, you refused to generalize from a possibly atypical sample.)

On the other hand, consider the expression "You've seen one, you've seen them all," which describes the very human tendency to do just the opposite. Making assumptions about larger groups based on very small samples is something we do all too often, and it can be summed up in one word: prejudice. It's sad but true: when it comes to making generalizations, what we resist with strawberries we do all too easily with human beings.

So what does this have to do with storytelling? In 1980, Richard Nisbett and two fellow psychologists conducted a study to see if a single, vivid story (i.e., a very small sample) would more powerfully affect test subjects than authoritative data on the same topic. As Paul Slovic and his colleagues would find two decades later, narrative beat the numbers every time.

For this experiment, the subjects - 127 University of Michigan students - were given an abridged version of an article originally published in *The New Yorker*. The article focused on a woman described as "a 43-year-

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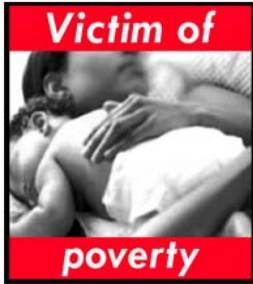
February classes registering now at The Goodman Center



About Us

free-range thinking is written by Andy Goodman and edited by Lori Matsumoto. To read back issues, download free

old, obese émigré from Puerto Rico who had an endless succession of common-law husbands [and] children at roughly 18-month intervals."



Her apartment was a mess, her children ran wild (eventually running afoul of the law) and the family ate "high priced cuts of meat and



[played] the numbers on the days immediately after the welfare check arrived." Of the 16 years this woman lived in New York City, 13 were spent on welfare. She was, in short, what Ronald Reagan once labeled a "welfare queen."

The students were divided into groups, and some were given data that painted a very different picture. This "informed" group was told that the average length of time most women stay on welfare is actually 2 years, not 13. The informed group members were explicitly reminded that the woman in the story *was not a typical case*.

Having read the story and reviewed the data, the subjects were asked to complete a questionnaire that measured their attitudes about welfare mothers. Despite the warning of a biased sample, the subjects' responses revealed overwhelmingly negative attitudes. The story had stuck while the data had been discounted.

To ensure that these findings were not specific to the issue of welfare, the researchers ran a similar experiment with prison guards as the topic. The question at hand: are most guards decent and humane in their treatment of prisoners, or do they tend to be callous and inhumane? Once again, the students were heavily influenced by a single story (in this case, a videotaped interview with a guard), even when warned that the person they were seeing was atypical.

For good causes, these results (as with those of Slovic, et al.) demand attention. Having evidence on your side is clearly not enough as long as human beings remain susceptible to sample bias. All the evidence in the world may go down in flames compared to a compelling story on the other side. As you gear up for the next showdown, sure, collect the evidence. But have a good story on hand as well to grab hearts and open minds for the numbers you have so diligently assembled.

The complete report on this study, "Insensitivity to Sample Bias: Generalizing from Atypical Cases" can be downloaded by [clicking here](#). Be advised there is an \$11.95 charge.

(Graphics with apologies to Barbara Kruger.)

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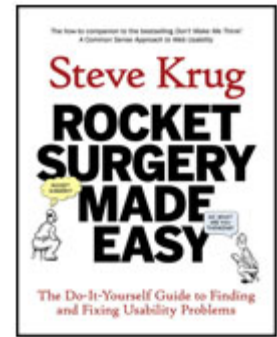
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Does Your Website Work?

Steve Krug's new book, *Rocket Surgery Made Easy*, can help you determine if your site's visitors are finding what they need or leaving in frustration.

When visitors arrive at your website, do they easily find what they want to find and do what they want to do? If you answered yes without hesitation, let me put it this way: are you sure?

Steve Krug wants you to be sure. Krug is a usability expert who has devoted years to understanding how people interact with websites. I've recommended his first book, *Don't Make Me Think*, many times, and now I'm strongly recommending his second, *Rocket Surgery Made Easy*.



Rocket Surgery is a step-by-step guide for conducting usability tests on your own (which will be far more affordable than hiring Krug or others like him.) Krug provides detailed checklists and scripts that walk you through the process and, at least in my case, build confidence that you can actually do this yourself.

Whether you're redesigning your website or just going with what you've got, investing \$35 in Krug's book is a great first step to ensuring that your site visitors get what they came for.

To learn more about Krug's book and read a sample chapter visit www.sensible.com.

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Tell Better Stories, Be More Strategic

February classes now enrolling at The Goodman Center

Our most popular online class, **Storytelling: Tapping the Power of Narrative**, returns in February to help you relocate your inner storyteller. In four hours (spread over four successive weeks), we'll focus on the structure and qualities of good stories - which you often use unconsciously - and explain how you can apply them in advocacy, fundraising, recruiting and other aspects of your work.



Classes will be held on February 16, February 23, March 2 and March 9 from 9-10a PT each day. Tuition is \$500 per student and discounts are available to organizations registering 3 or more. To find out more and reserve your space, [click here](#).

There are four potential points of connection between you and your target audience. When you know all four and design your communications around them, every minute and dollar you invest will have a better chance of paying off. Fail to connect on even one point, however, and you give your audience an opportunity to walk away.

In **Strategic Communications: Cutting Through the Clutter**, we'll help ensure you connect with your audiences. In two hours (spread over two weeks), we'll cover:

- The basics of framing
- Message creation and delivery
- Classic case studies from the public-interest sector
- An easy-to-use template for campaign design



Classes will be held on February 19 and 26 from 9-10a PT each day. Tuition is \$250 per student, and discounts are available to organizations registering 3 or more. To register online, [click here](#).

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