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# Telling the Climate Story with Data

## By Thomas H. Davenport

I am in Brazil at the HSM ExpoManagement event. I have worked with HSM or a couple of decades, and they put on a great show. But this one is really amazing—a three-ring circus with some of the best speakers on business and management around, including Ram Charan, Jim Collins, Rita Gunther McGrath, my Babson colleague Raj Sisodia, etc.

But the speaker I want to discuss in this column is not known for his business ideas, but rather his political and environmental ones. Al Gore was the keynote on Tuesday afternoon, talking about "Six Drivers of Global Change." To be honest, I missed some of the earlier ones in the six—the traffic in Sao Paulo is always abominable, and I was coming in from the airport. But I made it in time to hear about the driver of global change that clearly engages Mr. Gore's passion—climate change.

I am sure that there may be those that don't agree with Mr. Gore on that issue. I do agree with him, but that's not the point here. What I want to describe in this column is how Mr. Gore does a great job of "telling a story with data," which is something that virtually every organization and manager needs to do well these days.

You may remember from the "An Inconvenient Truth" movie that Mr. Gore is a pretty aggressive user of PowerPoint charts. He's still enamored of them, but they were pretty effective in the talk this week. Most of them show changes (in temperature, $CO_2$, etc.) over time, and line charts are an effective medium for that purpose. He uses a great chart showing a normal distribution of unusually cold, "normal", and unusually hot days, and how that distribution has shifted dramatically in the hot direction over the last several years. You didn't have to know much about statistics or probability to get the key message. Edward Tufte, the famous visual analytics guru, could not have done a better job. I think that Mr. Gore did also employ a pie chart or two, which Mr. Tufte would not have approved of.

But Mr. Gore doesn't stop with charts and graphs. He had a ton (perhaps too many) of photos from various floods and droughts around the world that illustrate his argument that the weather is getting weirder. And since he was speaking in Brazil, many of the photos were local—there has been a big drought in much of Brazil lately, and its effects were well-documented in Mr. Gore's presentation. One comes away with the distinct impression that extreme weather is increasingly common all around the globe, and the locals in Brazil could see that it is affecting them too.

I remember after seeing "An Inconvenient Truth" that it was a little depressing—unrelenting gloom about the environment and our role in it. Mr. Gore has learned the lesson that your arguments have to give people some hope. He concluded his presentation by pointing to dramatic

growth rates in solar and wind energy infrastructure and usage—in the U.S. and many other countries. Of course he argued that we need to do more, but it gave the audience some sense of possibility.

What Mr. Gore didn't do is just as important as what he did do to get across his message. There was little or no discussion of technical issues around the data or the findings—people just don't have interest in that kind of detail. No mention of regression coefficients or $R^2$ or anything statistical either. This was not a technical audience, and you don't want to let technical topics get in the way of your main idea.

One resource that Mr. Gore didn't use in this talk was humor—that has never been his strong point, and perhaps he believes that climate change isn't something to joke about. But it is possible to use humor effectively to address this issue—check out, for example, the recent John Oliver "Last Week Tonight" climate change debate (starring my friend and former student Tim Washer as climate change denier, and the ever-popular Bill Nye as the climate change proponent).

It certainly remains inconvenient for us to do anything about climate change. And one could argue that those who don't believe in it already are not going to be influenced by data. But for those on the fence, being able to tell a story with data (and pictures and hopeful conclusions) is perhaps the best way to get them off the fence. Whatever the topic you are trying to persuade people to adopt, Mr. Gore's techniques can be useful to you as well.

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