

Sam Knowles

Narrative by numbers: how to tell powerful and purposeful stories with data

How to be insightful: unlocking the superpower that drives innovation

Asking smarter questions: how to be an agent of insight

Routledge

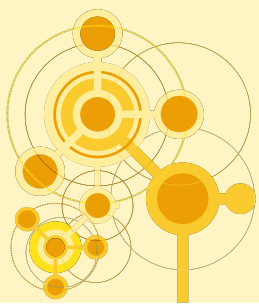
London and New York, 2018; 2020; 2023

164 páginas; 225 páginas; 280 páginas



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Book review: Sam Knowles's *Using Data Better* trilogy

Resenha da trilogia *Using Data Better*, de Sam Knowles

Reseña de la trilogía *Using Data Better*, de Sam Knowles

How can we use the power of communication data on research in communication planning, assessments, analyses, and evaluations? With the latest release of ChatGPT-4, a super-powerful conversational AI application developed by OpenAI, it is tempting to expect that technology will be the answer to all these questions.

However, according to Sam Knowles, a trained classicist, PhD-level behavioural psychologist, former PR consultant, and now data storyteller, merely relying on technology would be the wrong answer. In three books published over the last five years – *Narrative by Numbers* (*NBN*, 2018), *How to be Insightful* (*HTBI*, 2020), and *Asking Smarter Questions* (*ASQ*, 2023), Knowles argues that the most human of skills – curiosity, humility, listening, storytelling, and asking smarter questions – rather than tools and technology, help us get the most out of data. Consequently, *Using Data Better* (*UDB*) is a trilogy of books that shows how to ask the right questions that surface the right insights and create the right stories to achieve desired (and desirable) outcomes.

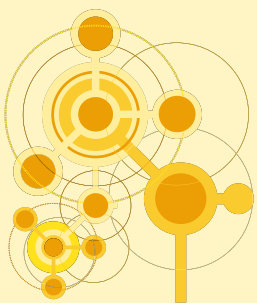
AN UNSYNCHRONOUS CHRONOLOGY

In the preface of his latest and final book in the *UDB* trilogy, Knowles admits that he “wrote the books in the wrong order.” The author points out that it was an “unsynchronous chronology” since, before presenting the main principles, which was the topic of *ASQ*, the last trilogy book, he started with data storytelling in *NBN* and, then, explored the paths to true data-driven insights in *HTBI*. However, the recurring themes that link the three books are more important than the order.

Unsurprisingly, given his background, Knowles's interests and curiosity are wide-ranging and eclectic. In *ASQ*, the author discusses the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein's “epistemophilic instinct” – a constant search for knowledge and desire to connect dots – and, throughout all three books, readers are provided with the perspectives of fellow epistemophiliacs from a wide range of fields. These voices – from Nobel Prize-winning scientists to policing professionals and Zen Buddhists – provide strong proof points for the core argument: that smarter questions stimulate more useful answers – even more so in turbulent times. Since ‘permacrisis’ – “an extended period of instability and insecurity” – was chosen as word of the year 2022 by Collins Dictionary (Jakobson et al. 2023, p.7), a focus on better questions for better answers is a timely and relevant intervention.

In 2012, the Harvard Business Review described data scientist as “The Sexiest Job of the 21st Century”¹. In *NBN*, Knowles acknowledges the critical function of data and analytics. This is not sufficient, however, if it lacks the human, storytelling side:

¹ DAVENPORT, Thomas H.; PATIL, DJ. Data scientist: the sexiest job of the 21st century. *Harvard Business Review*, Boston, out. 2012. Disponível em: <https://hbr.org/2012/10/data-scientist-the-sexiest-job-of-the-21st-century>. Acesso em: 12 jun. 2023.



"There are two skills that everyone needs in today's knowledge economy to thrive and do their jobs most effectively. These are the ability to interrogate, understand, and extract meaning from data and statistics, and the ability to use the insights derived from the data to move people to action. Analytics + storytelling = influence." (2018, p.1)

KEY INGREDIENTS FOR MORE EFFECTIVE DATA USE

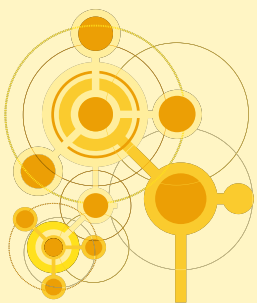
Each of the three books in the trilogy provides some of the key ingredients required for better data use. *NbN* starts by outlining the main principles of effective data storytelling, and dedicating a chapter to each:

1. Keep it simple (pp.21-42)
2. Find and use relevant data and avoid false positives (pp.43-66)
3. Beware the curse of knowledge (pp.81-102)
4. Know your audience and talk human (pp.103-126).

Building on these principles, *HTBI* addresses the concept of insight, which is much used and much misunderstood in organisational communication. Knowles understands insight as "a profound and deep understanding of a person, a thing, a situation, or an issue that we can use to help us advance" (2020, p.xiii). Again, the focus is not on big data, statistics, algorithms, and automated dashboards aggregating metrics and scores (although all these have a role to play), but rather on the intricate processes, "the history, psychology, and neuroscience" (p.xvi), along the journey of arriving at insights. It all comes together in the four stages of the "STEP Prism of Insight" (p.192):

1. Sweat – the hard graft to get the data (pp.93-112)
2. Timeout – creating the time and space for – sometimes unexpected – connections to form (pp.117-139)
3. Eureka – the precious moment when it suddenly clicks and 'everything makes sense' (pp.147-165)
4. Proof – the essential final step where gut feelings are validated, and 'why' questions are answered with evidence (pp.171-185)





Finally, in *ASQ*, this results in six universal principles for asking smarter questions (2023, p.268):

1. Curiosity – the epistemophilic instinct of wanting to know more, of always asking ‘why?’
2. Open-mindedness – ‘assuming nothing and considering everything’ and approaching one’s knowledge and perspective with humility (and not falling prey to confirmation bias).
3. Preparation – always being curious, always asking ‘what’s going on here’².
4. Openness – not prescribing answers; asking open questions usually generates more interesting responses.
5. Simplicity – breaking complex topics down into digestible chunks (“like shorter letters, simpler questions take longer to craft”).
6. Listening – primarily to hear and understand, not to speak.

ANCIENT WISDOM FOR MODERN COMMUNICATORS

Knowles draws extensively on Greek philosophy, in particular Aristotle's *Poetics* and its three-act structure of storytelling in *NBN* (2018, p.16), Archimedes and his *Eureka!* moment of insight in *HTBI* (2020, p.33ff.), and Socrates throughout *ASQ* – in fact, the premise, not only of *ASQ* but of the entire trilogy, is to apply the ‘Socratic method’ to the quest for smarter insights using smarter answers derived from smarter questions. It “starts from a position of ignorance and asks questions to build up knowledge” (2023, p.34). Thus, “channelling our inner Socrates” (2023, p.50) is a prerequisite for a more effective use of research, data, and insights in planning and executing effective communication campaigns to succeed in the ‘moving business’ (Pink 2013) of “persuading others to take action, to change their attitudes, beliefs, or actions” (Knowles 2023, p.54).

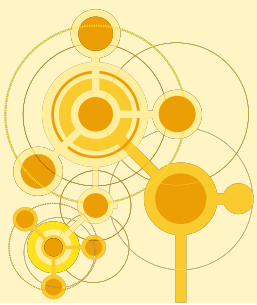
Although very practical, with key insight summaries, lists, and frameworks, Knowles's books are not airport bookshop-style \$3.99 quick-reads. They are packed with interviews and examples from a wide range of domains, illustrating his and his interviewees' journeys using academia and practice, learning and application. Most paths lead back to ancient Athens, where Socrates, Aristotle, and the Stoics laid the foundation. These paths converge on the principles of classic storytelling, characterized by the three stages of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Furthermore, they also delve into the art of rhetoric, combining *pathos* (emotion), *logos* (reason), and *ethos* (character) of the communicator to generate impact, influence, and persuade others.

However, these are just the foundations. A deep interest and understanding of psychology, coupled with data as evidence, adds to this narrative. It emphasizes the significance of posing right questions, which can lead to the right insights that enable the crafting of stories aimed at addressing the manifold complex problems in modern societies (Kroeger et al. 2022).

THE VIRTUE OF CHILDLIKE CURIOSITY

In addition to Greek philosophy, modern psychology, and data-driven storytelling, another thread present in *ASQ*, and in the entire *UDB* trilogy, is education: what we teach, how we teach, and what it means. This is a topic Knowles is particularly passionate and critical about as he sees “curiosity and creativity stunted by education” (2023, p.69).

² In a recent conversation, leading scholar of the measurement and evaluation of communication, Professor Jim Macnamara, described this as “frontloading the research”: giving more weight to the formative, planning phase of research. See also *Organizational Listening in Public Communication: Emerging Theory and Practice* (Macnamara 2022).



He praises Simon Sinek for his childlike embrace of the why question³, which infants ask upwards of 40,000 times in the years before they start school – at which point the focus switches to giving answers instead of asking questions. Thus, Knowles pleads with Roger Waters (“Hey! Teacher! Leave them kids alone!”) and educationalist turned TED Talk celebrity Sir Ken Robinson for the nurture of curiosity and creativity (2023, p.77ff.). In doing so, Knowles argues for a new curriculum of at least two mastered languages (mother tongue plus one); applied mathematics (particularly applied to finance, statistics, and data storytelling); creative expression; coding; logic; sports for physical and mental wellbeing; meditation and mindfulness; and critical faculty and judgment. Knowles highlights creative expression and critical faculty and judgment, which are not far from the perspective of ‘moving storytelling.’

There is a lot to learn from Knowles's trilogy on data storytelling, which is abundant with relevant observations and insights for everyone in the ‘moving business’ (whether as practitioners, or educators, or both). A personal favourite is the idea in *ASQ* of the “40,000 why?” questions that children ask before the age of five (2023, p.108). It links to a point made in *NbN*: “When someone presents you with a set of data or a data-rich presentation, become a four-year-old again.” (2018, p.16). Heeding this advice will inevitably make us better at using data, which in turn will make us better communicators.

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³ Sinek's *Start With Why* TED Talk from 2009 is the third most watched of all time. At no. 1, also referenced in *Ask Smarter Questions*, is Sir Ken Robinson's *How Schools Kill Creativity*.