FAQs on Visualising Data

WHAT IS A DATA VISUALISATION?

Data visualisation is a visual representation of data that has been abstracted in some schematic form, meaning it has been put into a table, picture or diagram. A primary goal of data visualisation is to communicate information clearly and efficiently to users. Effective visualisation helps users in analysing and reasoning about data and evidence. It makes complex data more accessible, understandable and usable.

How is this different from an Info-Graphic?

An infographic is more subjective and will use data to tell a story in a very deliberate and intentional way, while data visualisations are meant to be objective and are more focused on numbers. An infographic will likely utilise elements of information design and information architecture

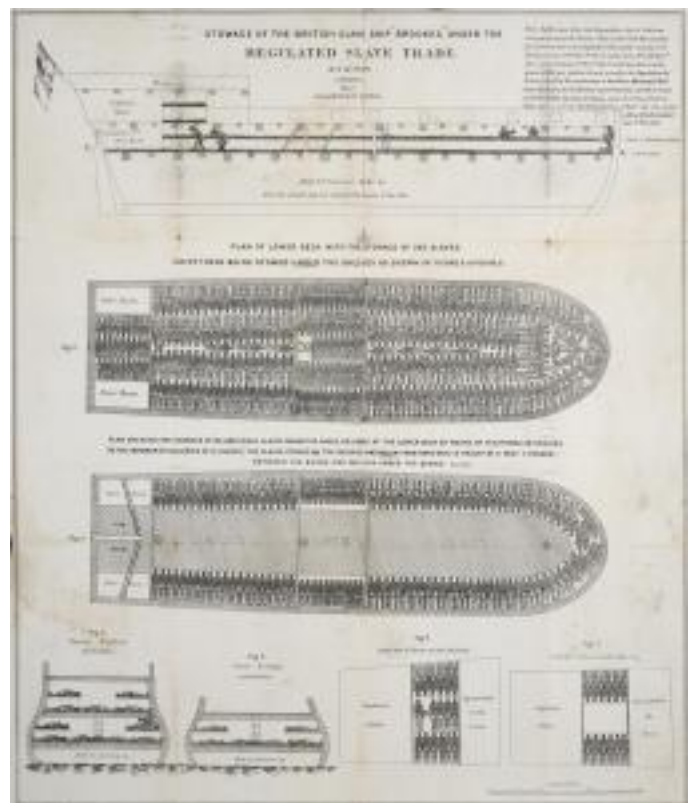### Why is visualising data suddenly so important?

Data visualisations driving social change is nothing new. There are examples from the 1700's that contributed to the end of the slave trade in England, and Florence Nightingale famously used a combination of pie and bar charts to convince Queen Victoria to improve conditions in military hospitals. Because we live in an information-rich age, visualisations are more critical than ever. They distil complex data in a way that is easier to understand and comprehend. Social media has allowed for easier sharing of smart and compelling data visualisations and infographics.

This visualisation contributed to the ending of the slave trade in England in 1789

What types of visualisations are most effective?

A useful visualisation will speak to its audience. The most effective visualisations are often ones that make a single point and show the least amount of data to get that point across. Keep in mind that the most effective social change graphics use visual metaphors or humour to get their point across and may not use any data at all. The most effective visualisations are ones that make a single point and show the least amount of data to get that point across. Simpler is better. Make your numbers relatable. Instead of just showing a HUGE number, relate that to something that will capture your audience's attention: e.g. this HUGE NUMBER is equal to 5000 lattes or the population of Nigeria. The most effective graphics will grab the viewer and have a clear message.

How do I start?

Start with your goals. What are you trying to accomplish? What change do you want to see? Then think about the story your data tells and how a visualisation will help you make that change. Next, you will need to get to know your audience as best you can. Try to figure out what they find compelling about your data.

What visuals will resonate with them? How do you want them to react to the visualisation? Then take a look at different data visualisations for inspiration.

Pie charts, good or bad?

Pie charts are good! Just understand when to use them. Pie charts can be generated in your spreadsheet program and are a significant first step in creating a data visualisation and helping to know if you need an infographic. Whether it will work as a final product depends on your data, audience and goals.

What software tools can I use to generate my data visualisation?

There are lots of tools available that can help you with making a preliminary data visualisation. However, you should not rely on using software to create a final infographic. If you want to make something compelling and useful, chances are you will need the help of someone with graphics and information design skills. Software can be a first step in visualising your data (see pie charts question above).

How should I approach creating online interactive infographics?

A useful interactive infographic will take a user on a journey. Again, think about how to convey the least amount of data that will grab your audience and compel them to learn more about your issue. You should provide a pathway for them to get stories about individuals' experiences. You also need to be able to drill down to all the detail that your data contains. Known as the three gets: 'get the idea, get the story and get the detail'. There is a fourth get that every interactive infographic should have, which is 'get involved'. A great example of this is the Land Matrix website.

Should I use a different data set in visualisations for different audiences?

Not necessarily. The beauty of data visualisations and infographics is that they can focus on different elements of a data set depending on who the audience is. The same data set can be the foundation for different visualisations that will mobilise allies, educate neutral parties, or counter opponents. You can see examples of how this works in our post on Action Cycles and Stakeholders

How can I get data to use in a visualisation?

You have two options to get data – either collect it yourself or find data that has already been received and made public. Data that is collected for other purposes may be more difficult to use. If you collect data yourself, you should be prepared to engage and share ownership with the community you are gathering the data from or with.

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
Fédération internationale des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge et du Croissant-Rouge
Federación Internacional de Sociedades de la Cruz Roja y de la Media Luna Roja
الاتحاد الدولي لجمعيات الصليب الأحمر والهلال الأحمر

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