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Telling Stories with Local Data

12/6/2019

By Danielle DeVasto

In the spring of 2019, fourteen undergraduate students from across UWM enrolled in my course on Information Design. We spent the semester together exploring the theories, practices, and technologies involved in the ways we convey information. Amidst a stream of literal blizzards, we grappled with the vortex of data that we live in – a vortex in which we work to extract pertinent information from a swift current of text and visuals while also facing the challenges of getting our own messages to people dealing with information overload.

In response to this information overload, one of my goals was to think with my students about the roles that visuals can play in shaping our experiences and relationships with information and each other. I wanted us to explore the wide range of choices that make up visual compositions, choices that are shaped by and have consequences on audiences. Visuals, for example, can be designed to facilitate efficiency or transparency, an understandable reaction to the problem of information overload. But they might also be designed to encourage us to act or relate in other ways – like slowing down or looking thoughtfully.

Students were challenged to engage these themes through one of their major course projects – developing a static infographic. Infographics are visual displays of information that combine data visualizations, illustrations, text, and images together into a format to tell stories. These stories are often complex, but infographics have the particular potential to make that complexity clear and engaging. Infographics take advantage of the power of visual rhetoric and tap into our brains' inclination towards the visual. Research shows that we pay more attention to images than text. We understand them better, remember them longer, and are more likely to believe texts that incorporate them. In other words, infographics, like visuals more broadly, do not simply display or show information; they are rhetorical and “perform persuasive work” (Wysocki 124).

We began with many questions and much uncertainty. What stories might we tell? To what ends? And where would that data come from? Given the constraints of the course, I thought we might best serve and be served by staying local. And so, we had the privilege of partnering with the good people of the [Encyclopedia of Milwaukee](#) (EMKE) to produce infographics that visually interpreted qualitative, quantitative, and spatial data relating to the past, present, and future of the greater Milwaukee area. As an encyclopedia, the EMKE is information rich and text-heavy; as a digital humanities project, it's public-facing. The situation seemed prime for “infographic-ing.” In consultation with editors, students' infographics were considered for publication on EMKE's social media channels as a way of piquing interest and connecting audiences to encyclopedia entries.

While staying rooted in Milwaukee, students used the EMKE entries as launching points to develop their stories. As they dug into the encyclopedia, I asked students to think about:

- what was interesting, confusing, and surprising
- who or what wasn't there
- what has changed
- what they wanted to know more about
- how an event (like the consumption of beer or the closing of factories) impacted the lives of certain people in the area
- how things and ideas spread
- what we've forgotten that maybe we shouldn't have
- how something that happened in the past is impacting us presently

As we discovered, the entries are already set up to tell stories. In some cases, students could rely on the entry content to visualize the story already present. But in many cases, students collected and transformed additional local data with the support of data and GIS specialists from the UWM Libraries. From these efforts, we learned a lot about the rise and fall of the Milwaukee [ice](#) and [flour industries](#), [tailgating](#), [custard](#), [Hmong migration](#), [water](#), [the Filipino-Milwaukee community](#), [energy](#), [waste management](#), and Milwaukee [tourism](#). In the process and from reading their final deliverables, I saw my students' changed relationships with the people and places (past and present) of Milwaukee.

We also learned that finding data is hard work. Transforming it into visual stories is even harder. And while it was all harder than maybe any of us anticipated, I hope that the experience of designing (and not just analyzing) has helped them see that visual strategies have real effects, effects that can help shape how we see information, ourselves, our city, and our relationships.

I am grateful to this group of students, Krista Grensavitch and the EMKE staff, Kristin Briney, and Stephen Appel for taking risks and getting messy with Milwaukee and with me.

Danielle DeVasto is an assistant professor in the Department of Writing at Grand Valley State University. Her research takes seriously the pressing need for effective, ethical interaction between experts and non-experts, especially in the contexts of natural hazards and science-policy decision making. She studies questions such as how hazard maps shape user agency, how public-science interactions in lower stakes environments (like planetariums) can support those in higher stakes settings, and how visuals can be designed to meaningfully communicate with patient populations in cross-cultural contexts. She teaches courses that focus on how writing and rhetoric can help shape more livable worlds.