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Data Visualization

Led by Brianna Losoya - DC

Notes by Simone Zhang

Present: Alyssa Sylvaria, Michael Carnathan, Jay Colbert, Erica Raleigh, Josh Wheeling, Mark Abraham, April Hirsh, Lionel Foster, Ben Horwitz, Rebecca Hefner, Joe Baldwin, Meg Merrick, Eric Busboom, John Manieri, Jim Farnam, David Epstein, Edwin Quiambao, Elizabeth Morehead

Erica Raleigh – Can you make Graham’s guide to creating the poverty maps available? We’re developing guides on how to download and load data into Google Fusion

Eric Busboom – A lot of what we’ve been looking at is not web sites, which constrains people. Give people tools and data. Tableau is another one. Teaching people how to use those tools is important

Erica –Where do people fall? Do you focus on building tools or helping people use it?

Joe Baldwin – We’re wrestling with who our audience is. We want something that’s good for advanced users and for lower level users so that we can allow them to generate in a table or a chart instead of something complex like a map. How do you balance that power with simplicity? What are they going to use it for? With map filters – use it to find census tracts, or do a comparative analysis.

That brings up for me another question. With these tools, how are you collecting data about your users? And what have you learned?

Joe Baldwin– We use Salesforce. We talk about unique users, how long they stay. We shifted from an online data portal on foreclosure to broader indicators. Traffic increased 325% percent. This leads to more advanced requests.

We use BatchGeo for a lot of things. We use it for early learning locations. It comes with Google Analytics. This is the most viewed content on our site.

Joe Baldwin - Analytics are a good thing, but the target of the audience is critically important. And infographics: that’s the way to go for some of the audiences. The jury’s still out as to whether you can have a central portal for your target audience. We’re using an off-the-shelf tool, there’s a chart here, a map there. It’s overwhelming for a policymaker. It’s how to make that information available, to port it in and to be able to tell a story.

XX – The community groups we work with love that.

Ben Horwitz - In New Orleans, we’re a small nonprofit. We don’t have the technical expertise. We started with census data. The site is helpful, the data isn’t enough. They want answers. The neighborhood pages are visited by students and community members who need low-level technical solutions. Whereas in our reports, we use infographics, we augment that with PowerPoint. We use tableau. That’s an easy tool. We want to serve decision makers and community members. They want things that are more easily relatable.

Lionel Foster – I get handed amazing content. It’s amazing to see who wants to use these data visualization. My primary target is the press. If I can get a major outlet, that will drive a ton of traffic. For the press and everyday readers their algorithm for processing information: 1) ooh it’s pretty 2) I can play with it 3) I can learn something. We have these sophisticated researchers who do cool work. I am a geek whisperer. I translate their stuff so other people can get it. So we’re always thinking about windows into sophisticated work. You want different bells and whistles for different groups.

XX = I had a question and I’m new to NNIP, it seems like what we want for end users is different from what we want for reports. For those who write reports: do you use different tools for end users vs reports? For example I use R sometimes, but I don’t know if it would be accessible to others.

Eric Busboom – One of our customers buys data from us. Journalists set a price, $200-$400. Behind that is all the data. You get a pyramid. From the top level, there’s how you think about it. It’s part of an effort to find the level that people want to be communicated with. Sharing R is a part of that.

Brianna Losoya – What tools do you use to learn more about data visualization and develop your skills?

Erica Raleigh- there’s a great program at UMichigan delivered by people in human centered designs. They cover how to design tools. How do we integrate more? We got a Knight prototype, to test out assumptions about user bases and figure out what people want. We’re taking 6 months to figure out what people want. We started with our assumptions, but now we’re trying to ground truth them.

Lionel Foster – It’s valuable having a lot of different perspectives look at an item being presented. Our developers and graphic designers did great work. I looked at a map we made once and I zoom in on it and I realize we need things to help orient people...add streets. Our approach at Urban is increasingly to tell people: “Use our tools to tell your own story.” Often we have a team of a designer, programmer, and a word guy.

Ben Horwitz – To add on that, when we communicate, we want our graphics to contain the message and not have users find it on their own. Just tell them.

Two quick things: Don’t Make Me Think by Steve Krug. Considers how people approach web sites. On how to test the user interface of your web page, see Rocket Surgery Made Easy by Steve Krug. Implementable.

Elizabeth Morehead - There’s so much here. Money is a big consideration. With the regional atlas tool we have two approaches 1) allow others to do work 2) is doing interpretive work. Some here are involved in advocacy. Key to their argument is data being processed in a way that produces value. Needless to say, every map is influenced by the colors. On the interpretation -> the experts that did the whitepaper did use the tool to do their analysis. And then there are static images of the tools so that people can go into play with that tool. That tool was a custom made tool. It was originally meant for in-house GIS mapping. What we’re finding is that even with little money expended, it’s being widely used by a wide variety of people. With Greater Portland Pulse, we used Weave but it didn’t work. Initially we used it for charts and graphs. I think it’s getting old. We focused a lot of our training on teaching people how to use Weave. We see that it’s used in the policy arena -> we need to do education about what an indicator is. We want everything, when you ask users what they want.

XX – there are many tools that come and go. I want to bring up Data Package (data.okfn.org) , open data foundation, packaging data agnostically. At some point you can use your data for any platforms without having to do conversations.

David Epstein– how do you figure out how people are using the web site? A lot of web sites are set up about how people use web sites. People are using web clicking technology. If you have access to your servers, you could potentially already have all the data from requests, including what people are querying and how they’re formulating queries. Are they looking at parcels or specific ranges of parcels? I found that to be very interesting.

April Hirsh– we have tremendous interest in finite use data bases. We have parcels, child data, aggregate neighborhood data system. I’m not sure if the future is specific data sets and requests and trying to phase out that aggregate data system. Don’t know about the audience. Everybody wants everything at the same time.

Brianna Losoya – What strategies do you to fund data visualization efforts?

XX- The development of the mapping tool is being funded by people doing technical assistance. We haven’t felt a conflict between areas. We do neighborhood level indicators, we don’t do a full array. We focus on economic indicators. We do foreclosures, vacancies, jobs. We’ve received funding from institutions for technical assistance to community groups, which is funded by different funders who are getting Community Reinvestment Act credits.

Edwin Quiambao – I see this conversation about data visualization flowing along two lines: 1) Communication, 2) The exploration and analysis of data. Just wanted to make that distinction.

Jim Farnam – I just wanted to put in a pitch about the cross-site technical learning community discussion happening later. I’ve been working with 18 groups in the open indicators consortium to broaden beyond Weave. But we’ve learned that we’re independently developing the same tools. Let’s coordinate. The whole Weave equation is complex. In some places, it’s soaring. In other places, it’s total frustration. It’s a complex equation to get the right tools, occasion, and the right people. In CT, we went to the state legislature, it was a complex visualization that we showed. It was shown to the appropriations committee. They said we want that. We want to be able to see the trends and relationship, that would’ve tremendously benefited in our decision making. Now we have an appropriation to further build out our web sites. I’d love to see what you’re doing in Detroit. That’s an example of a shared tool, a user interface from New Orleans. Also, the technical tools on how to do user interface testing are very useful to us.

Mike Carnathan – Data visualization is expensive. What we’ve found is that you really need something slick to show funders to say “hey bet on us.” We use Weave. We don’t have a deep user base. We use it to stage stories and impress funders. We’re driving it, and people love seeing it. As soon as they try to do it themselves, they run into more roadblocks. We did get a grant from a funder to do a Weave lite version. The same thing’s been invented three times.

Erica Raleigh – The Grand Rapids site, they have an easy vs advanced data tool. Backed by Weave. So I think it must’ve been developed 5 or 6 different times

Jim Farnam - They’re all slightly different. Let’s communicate better.

Mike Carnathan – Different sites have different technological prowess. Sometimes people don’t know what they want until they see it.

Erica- Raleigh I wish we could have this discussion more frequently. I’m thinking of Josh and taking their parcel tool. We shared our tool and they improved it and now I want it back.

Jim Farnam - Maybe we want a switchboard to know who’s developing what tool.

Brianna Losoya – Maybe that’s where NNIP can play a role. Documenting. For people to keep up with what others are doing using the web site.

Lionel Foster - Graham’s map about poverty was very popular with our mailing list. It’s the biggest thing anyone has ever clicked on. It really educated me about how savvy and technically proficient our users are, and how hungry people are for information. It overnight changed our perceptions of who our users area.

Briana Losoya – Has anyone delved into 3D mapping?

Mike Carnathan – We’ve done some. It’s a shiny way to show things. Some counties are tall. It’s not super extra useful.

April Hirsh – We’re totally missing someone like Lionel. Is it possible to get more of his brain on a regular basis?

Lionel Foster - I’ll give you my email address .That’s part of the reason Kathy had me come up. I’m definitely a resource for NNIP mother ship. In the short term, we’ll figure something out.

April Hirsh– Maybe like a user’s group?

Lionel Foster –Data visualization is all the rage -> where is it going? More and more organizations are going to use it. Some will use it badly. People will get turned off. I don’t know how to define what’s good. Are people just going to gorge on it? I’m practically glued to my phone, but I just don’t know where it’s going and it scares me.

XX - Part of what people in NNIP is about is that we are the credible sources of information. Just like the Internet is the second coming of movable type. So part of what we can do is be credible and help teach people media literacy in figuring out what is credible.

Elizabeth Morehead - We’ve seen data visualization as art, without a lot of information. All the time we get things with data -> we get things that look beautiful but there’s stuff on the back end that’s bad.

XX - We have to consider the different ways the graphic can convey information. What we’re doing can be faster. Ultimately it’s about conveying information. Maps are not just geographically accurate information. Subway maps -> convey information. Not just about how to make it the prettiest. The most effective map is good at conveying information.

Eric Busboom – sometimes the best thing is a bar graph. Sometimes there are no geographical structures. You need to think about what you’re going to say and what you want people to learn. A lot of these things are entertainment. Sometimes pretty things aren’t the most effective tool.