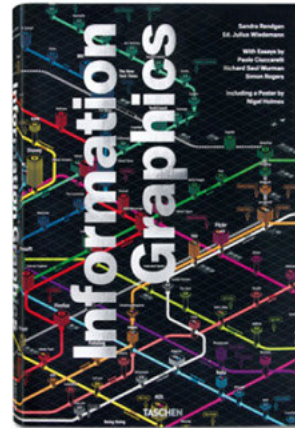


# The color and shape of data

By Jenna Marotta | July 20, 2012, 2:18 AM PDT

Please join us in welcoming Jenna Marotta, who will edit *The Printed Word*, a new column on SmartPlanet dedicated to showcasing the best ideas, insights and perspective in published works.

Avant-garde tables should borrow a design element from TV dinner trays. Every modern console bound for a high-rise triplex needs a debossed compartment perfectly-sized to fit a prized coffee table book. The function of this form? To display titanic art, fashion and photography titles by Taschen, the daredevil 32-year-old, Cologne-based publishing house (see *The Big Book of Breasts* and *The Big Butt Book*). In late April, Taschen released *Information Graphics*, a theoretically tame compendium that's geek porn nonetheless. The 8-pound, 480-page book (\$69.99) is selling well, and will be back in stock on Taschen's website next month.



Author Sandra Rendgen, an art historian who appropriately acts as a curator here by presenting more than 400 infographics, structures her material in a chart-worthy fashion. The first 90 pages comprise her introduction — which alludes to cave paintings and hieroglyphic-adorned tombs as the original infographics — plus essays by architect Richard Saul Wurman, journalist Simon Rogers and Paolo Ciuccarelli, scientific director of the DensityDesign Research Lab at the Polytechnic University of Milan. One reason this section is so long is that each essay is printed in English, German and French; each infographic that follows includes a three-column explanation, one column per language.

Rendgen's essay is the most interesting of the four — the project is, after all, her brainchild. She writes, “On the one hand, infographics are supposed to convert complex problems into images that are easy to understand, but on the other, there is traditionally a suspicion that ‘beautiful’ graphics may tell lies.” I'd never heard this allegation. If anything, I thought a visually stunning infographic simply meant more care had been put into every aspect of it, from the reporting to the fact-checking to the design. (Similar, perhaps, to why Pixar films are so much more sumptuous than 95 percent of “grown-up” films — only a good script can inspire animators to slave over hundreds of millions of cels for several years). Rendgen also explains the recent fascination with infographics: more data is available thanks to the Internet, and the stylistic trend of marrying abbreviated text with detailed illustrations.

*Information Graphics* features charts and maps from U.S. magazines, including *Wired*, *Popular Science*, *Newsweek*, *Condé Nast Traveler*, *National Geographic*, *The Fader*, *Print*, *Men's Health* and *Good*. With at least 15 infographics from its print and web editions, *Good* may be the most frequently referenced periodical in the book, which is well-deserved. (That accolade is undercut by recent and sudden firing of most of *Good's* editorial staff, in June.) As I leafed through the tome, I felt the palpable absence of *Fast Company* and, especially, *New York* magazine. I keep a thick folder of saved food and pop culture infographics from *New York*, though in Rendgen and Taschen's defense, the volume has been long gestating, and *New York* only began churning out exceptional infographics in the last two years.

Lots of attention is paid to international publications (Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Croatia, Denmark, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, South Korea, Spain, Sweden and the U.K. are represented), which is excellent to see, even if it's slightly depressing to contemplate the shipping and handling costs to subscribe to just a few of them. But not all examples come from the world of newspapers and magazines. *Information Graphics* boasts T-shirt designs, museum installations, drawings, paintings, musical scores and posters, most notably a large gatefold called “Nigel Holmes' Map of Infographia: An Idiosyncratic Taxonomy,” as devised by the eponymous graphic designer.

Richard Saul Wurman, one of *Information Graphics'* essayists, coined the acronym LATCH — location, alphabet, time, category, hierarchy — to describe how data is typically arranged in infographics. There are the fewest number of alphabetical examples, Rendgen says, so she has organized the remainder of the book into four colored sections: “Location” (orange), “Time” (pink), “Category” (blue) and “Hierarchy” (green), making it easy for readers to zero in on infographics they'd like to rip out and frame.

My favorite examples veered towards typography, sports and literature. A poster by Sam Potts links every character in the universe of David Foster Wallace's thousand-page novel *Infinite Jest*, a tribute the author did not live to see. Another poster I loved, “Taxonomy of Team Names in the Major Professional Sports Leagues of

the United States” by Jeremy Yingling, divvied up team inspirations into groups such as people, objects and animals — and subgroups such as fish, reptiles and insects, à la the National Basketball Association’s New Orleans Hornets.

Timely reminders of the recession are also included, such as “Life Map to Quarter-Life Crisis,” by Colleen Corcoran; an illustration of once-anticipated, now-halted skyscraper construction by Theo Deutinger and Barbara Weingartner for *Mark* magazine; and from 2003, “The Corporate Vermin that Rules America,” by Jonathan Barnbrook and Pedro Inoue, depicting members of the Bush administration as beetles and roaches of various sizes. There are also maps of web trends, charts about privacy settings and illustrations of the Twitterverse imagined as the actual cosmos. (Newly installed Yahoo chief executive Marissa Mayer gets her mention on page 390.)

Although I enjoyed *Information Graphics* very much, I had a few small problems with it. Literally: for such a big book, its index is too small — just three pages — and much of the text is tiny, to the point of illegibility. Additionally, some of the infographics (“Relationships Among Scientific Paradigms” among them) simply required more explanation than a 100-word blurb. Though it’s a noble goal for the author to let the graphics speak for themselves, I was in places starved for information.