The Age of the Infographic

Charts, graphs, and timelines in the post-newspaper world

Greg Beato from the October 2012 issue

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In February 2012, Mark Perry, a professor of economics and finance at the University of Michigan, published a chart on his blog that plots the U.S. newspaper industry's annual advertising revenues from 1950 to 2011, using revenue data compiled by the Newspaper Association of America. The first 50 years show a prosperous ascent from a little less than $20 billion in total revenues in 1950 to $63.5 billion in 2000 (in 2011 dollars). Then, in 2001, a catastrophic plunge begins. Within a decade, total revenues have plummeted to the general territory where they started in 1950.

While the death of the newspaper industry is extremely well-trod ground at this point, rarely has anyone told the story so concisely, with such dramatic, statistical precision. But even as Perry's chart evokes images of fortunes lost and cultural power dispersed, it also stands as powerful evidence that the future of news, if not newspapers, is more promising than ever. Just 30 years ago, compiling a chart like Perry's would have been an act of journalism so tedious only well-paid professionals would have bothered to attempt it.

Now citizen journalists bang out such fare for extracurricular kicks. What once would have required trips to the library, long-distance phone queries, T-squares, rulers, erasers, diligence, and patience now mostly needs just a flash of inspiration, a sense of the story buried in the data. Meanwhile, the data proliferate in astonishing fashion, and the tools to manipulate them grow ever more powerful. Even professionals barely scratch the surface of what data-driven journalism makes possible.

As a comprehensive new volume from Taschen makes clear, the challenges that face tomorrow's news creators and consumers are ones of abundance, not scarcity. At close to 500 oversized pages, *Information Graphics* is a coffee table book that's more solidly constructed than most coffee tables. Its pages are filled with beautiful, meticulous, and, at their best, revelatory visualizations of worldwide oil consumption, the most frequent causes of death, household spending, the national debt, wealth distribution, etc.

In 1982, when *USA Today* debuted and first began to present its data-driven "Snapshots" as a key component of its editorial mix, these perky charts and graphs (no one called them infographics yet) were often derided as a primary symptom of journalism's decline, a way to make trivial information significant, important enough for inclusion on the front page. Now we look to infographics not as a way to dumb down stories but rather as a means of smartening them up. "At a time when everyone is swamped by information it is necessary firstly to subject data to precise analysis and secondly to prepare it in an intelligent and appealing way," exclaims *Information Graphics* editor Sandra Rendgen in one of the book's four introductory essays.

Not every infographic lives up to this directive, of course; many of them place far more emphasis on aesthetics than analysis. In recent years, infographics have become a favorite tool of online marketers looking to arrest the attention of restless Web surfers with eye candy that offers the promise and at least the general shape of fast, numbers-driven epiphany. But a good infographic doesn't just pair interesting statistics with fun illustrations. Instead, it concretizes otherwise inscrutable connections and causes and thus makes context, nuance, and complexity easier to digest. What is the association between fast food restaurant

prevalence and community obesity rates? How does education level correlate with life span? A well-constructed infographic can answer such questions in vivid and concise fashion.

In the past, professional journalists functioned as low-tech search engines. They combed city budgets, attended school board meetings, and generally did their best to aggregate and analyze the data that our major institutions produced but did little to make accessible to the general public. Now, as *Guardian*Editor Simon Rogers points out in an essay he contributed to *Information Graphics*, the U.S. government makes more than 1,500 data sets available via its data.gov site. In England, Rogers writes, "every local authority…will have published every individual item of spending over £500" very soon.

Professional news organizations can still add value to such information by building interfaces to access it and by reporting on specific stories that it engenders. But news organizations no longer need to deploy as much manpower as they did when data gathering was a less automated endeavor. Instead, institutions that newspapers once monitored will increasingly engage in "self-reporting" by making their data easily accessible to the masses. And individual readers, using interfaces created by news organizations, will do much of the analysis themselves.

For now, however, most news organizations tend to conceptualize infographics more as stories than apps. Consider an example showcased in *Information Graphics* that *The New York Times* created in 2009. Entitled "The Jobless Rate for People Like You," it's an interactive chart that allows you to apply up to four demographic filters to unemployment rates, including race, gender, age, and education. Thus you can see the unemployment rate for white, college-educated men over 45 or the rate for Hispanic females aged 15 to 24 without a high school degree.

It's a fantastic chart, but the *Times* created it in 2009, using a static set of data, and now it's years out of date. This is exactly how traditional newspaper stories live and die, but why should such limitations be placed on infographics? A version of the chart that automatically taps into the latest unemployment data released by the federal government could become an evergreen feature of the *Times'* website. And why aren't news organizations like the *Times* doing more to curate and present vast repositories of infographics that are up to date, searchable, and organized to shed light on complex, ongoing stories like the federal budget, health care, and climate change?

A book like *Information Graphics*, which is meant to inspire potential infographic creators, is a nice addition to one's design library. A Wikipedia-like collection of online infographics aimed at informing news consumers could change the world.