

Data Visualization: Interpretative Dimensions

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The use of visualizations to display, analyze, and present data has become commonplace. The familiarity of the graphs, charts, diagrams, timelines, maps, and renderings makes them legible and useful as a way to see patterns and anomalies in large-scale data sets. But the visualizations also perform certain acts of concealment: they do not show the processes of parameterization, the lifecycle of data production, or the many interpretative choices made in the course of moving from a phenomena (social, cultural, natural, textual etc.) to a single image. They do not allow a distinction between evidence (source materials, documents, data production) and argument (assessments and judgments), which are collapse in the single image. Current visualizations are not designed to not serve interpretative methods. The reification of data in visualizations is rhetorically powerful, but is it really serving the complex needs of inquiry in many disciplines where the presentation of quantitative information might be better served by more nuanced and complex representations? How might the interpretative dimensions of knowledge production be better served by expanding the visual vocabulary and syntax of current visualization techniques? Is it possible to introduce other dimensions to visualizations that reveal features of data, and data production, in ways that align with insights from critical data studies, philosophy of representation, and other theoretical engagements with knowledge production? This talk aims to sketch the foundations of an approach to visualization of data that includes interpretative dimensions. The paper is in part informed by work of the 3DH (three-dimensional dynamic data visualization in the humanities) group at the University of Hamburg.