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The rebirth of the infographic

Complex data-based images are all the rage now. Are infographics worth your time?

by [Sean Blanda](#) | Wed, 2009-11-04 15:07



As data and graphic design tools become more widely available, the infographic is becoming the trendy way to display complex data sets to readers.

There are several blogs dedicated to the burgeoning graphic design field and many online publications are leaning on the infographic as a way to concisely tell a story.

"The goal [of all media] is to communicate information as clearly as possible," says Morgan Clendaniel, deputy editor at [GOOD magazine](#). "Infographics can be a valuable way to do that."

"I do think there is a bigger interest, I definitely get more emails of people asking me to make infographics," says Atley Kasky, graphic designer at GOOD magazine.

Clendaniel, along with the rest of the GOOD staff, helps produce infographics for GOOD's "[Transparency](#)" section both online and in print. The section is dedicated entirely to infographics and has been publishing for nearly three years.

Infographics have long been staples of print publications, however the Internet helps infographics circulate long after the print issue is thrown in the recycling bin. Now, GOOD's infographs can go viral long after they were initially published.

"Time and Newsweek used to do full-page infographics and people forgot about them [a week later]," says Clendaniel.

Additionally, infographic creators now have access to thousands of open databases to help compile information that, five years ago, would have taken much longer to compile.

GOOD magazine, which focuses on "pushing the world forward," typically features articles about sustainability and environmentally friendly living. And many of GOOD's infographics focus on topics such as [water conservation](#) or the differences between [Sunni and Shiite Muslims](#).

Clendaniel says that the magazine was inspired by an old Wired Magazine feature called "InfoPorn" where the tech magazine would graph a complex data set, such as the foods with the highest cost per calorie. GOOD wanted to take large sets of policy data and make it more accessible and helpful to the average reader.

GOOD says that the section aligns with the magazine's overall editorial mission of making the world a better place by putting statistics into perspective.

Using graphics to provide that perspective can be effective for complex topics. For example, *saying* that the Great Pacific Garbage Patch is an environmental issue is one thing, but *seeing* that the patch is easily larger than Texas is [much more alarming](#) and can have a greater impact on the reader.

"A large part of making things better is a greater understanding," says Clendaniel. "Its like the GI Joe model: knowing is half the battle."

WORKFLOW

Though infographics may seem appealing as eye candy and effective link fodder, they can be complex productions that take hours to complete.

"The workflow is different for each product," says Indiana University graphic designer Elisha Hardy. Hardy is the curator and one of the designers of the university's "[Places & Spaces](#)" exhibit that is designed to map scientific information so it is accessible to the common person.

In her case, Hardy says that sometimes she is heavily involved in a graphic from the idea stage, while other times she is just handed a rough image and asked to make minor adjustments.

For GOOD, the workflow mirrors a traditional editorial project. Editor Morgan Clendaniel says he often comes across data sets from the U.N. or federal government websites and passes them along to his designers.



[See our list of the 17 best infographics.](#)



The government has made databases available to public as part of the White House's "[Open](#)" program.

A small sampling of blogs dedicated to infographics:

- [Information Aesthetics](#)
- [InfoJocks](#)
- [Chart Porn](#)
- [Information is Beautiful](#)
- [Simple Complexity](#)

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"I'll give [the designer] the rough data as well as the point we are trying get people to take away with that data," says Clendaniel.

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The designer will then propose a handful of design options to the editors. After both parties agree, Clendaniel says that GOOD tries to give designers relative autonomy in constructing the graphic.



"I always ask Morgan: 'what do you want to communicate?' And then I try to make a series of images that conveys that while expanding further down to issues that people don't always see from a table of data," says Kasky. "The goal is to do something aesthetic that doesn't muddle [the data]."

The overall production time depends on the complexity of the data and the subject matter. Kasky estimates that some infographics take 12 to 15 hours of work, while others can push 40.

"Most of the time the information is so dense you have to break it down to smaller pieces, into steps," says Hardy.

ADVICE

Making an infographic requires two different skill sets: the ability to parse data and find an important message and the skill to create an attractive image that accurately represents that data.

Most designers use industry standard tools such as Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator and Adobe InDesign, but good design sense is still needed to create wonderful infographics. Here was some advice from those who do it every day.

Make the image accessible: In design, and in life, different colors carry different connotations.

"You can use color to support your message and make things stand out," says Hardy.

However many people are color blind so make sure your designers make your graph is readable in black and white.

Know the final resting place of your graph: Designing a chart that is tens of thousands of pixels wide won't read well if embedded in a blog post. Know how your graph is going to be displayed and keep the raw source files around to modify your images if the need arises.

Determine your message: While in the planning stages of the infographic, establish a single message to communicate. GOOD magazine often creates infographics that have a social conscience, while Elisha often makes graphs that make science accessible to the everyman. Just like written content, if there are too many messages the infographic can become ambiguous.

Infographics are no different from editorial: Some designers measure success of their infographics in terms of page views; others measure how well the message was conveyed in the image.

"It's hard to measure success as far as the impact it might have, but it gets a little easier when you talk about the stories being told and the data not being confused or muddled," says Kasky.

Use the government: Both GOOD and the Places and Spaces project heavily rely on free government data to make visualizations. Visit data.gov to get started on government datasets.

Social news is your friend: Long after they appear in print, infographics can be rediscovered when promoted on sites like Digg and Reddit. Both sites have very active image sections and infographics often make the front page of both sites.

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Sean Blanda is an editor of eMedia Vitals and a writer based out of the Port Richmond neighborhood in Philadelphia. Named by UWIRE as one of the top 100 young journalists in 2008, he has served as Web Editor of several publications, including the Philadelphia City Paper. He has also been published in the Philadelphia Daily News, Philadelphia Inquirer and the Wilmington News Journal.

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Sean also co-founded and writes for Technically Philly, a news site that covers the technology industry in Philadelphia.

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