Tracing the Ideologies of Vision

Adam Riggio, Royal Crown College, adamriggio@gmail.com

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*The Infographic: A History of Data Graphics in News and Communications*
Murray Dick
MIT Press, 2020
248 pp.

Murray Dick's *The Infographic* is a humble book with an ambitious aim at which it only gestures. A work of history, it traces the development of the infographic as it exists in news publications today. This makes it a valuable book, an insightful education in the history of graphic communication, what roles visual communication played (or was kept from playing) in popular media over the last three centuries, how, and why. Dick has one clearly stated goal in his historical investigations: discovering why infographics and visual communications more generally played the small role that they did.

To do this, Dick marshals historical, political, economic, philosophical, and visual aesthetic analyses throughout the book. He sometimes switches among analytic frameworks a little too quickly to be sure of his argument on the first read-through—Chapter Four, on how the Victorian era and its surrounding decades treated infographic use and innovations, is the worst offender in this, though the issue amounts to a quibble. But the book's most uncomfortable constraint is that Dick restricts his inquiry largely to a single country.

Historically speaking, Dick did choose the most important single country to trace the history of newspaper journalism: Britain. It was in Britain that the chaotic market in privately printed popular pamphlets on politics, news, and moral education first organized and professionalized into broadsheet daily newspapers. What's more, many of the major London newspapers whose practice modelled so many of the early conventions and approaches of journalism still exist today (or until rather recently). So there is strong institutional continuity on which Dick can anchor his investigation. He works with a unified archive.

### Experiments in Rendering the Significance of the Complex

Yet the constraints and unity of his archive keep him from completing a full analysis of the history of the infographic. Consider this example in the history of graphic design. It plays a pivotal role in the narrative of *The Infographic* the book, but leaves a reader wondering what role it played in the full development of the infographic itself.

Most Western humanities academics first encounter Otto Neurath in his role as a leading member of the Vienna Circle, the school of scientific reductionism that played such an outsize role in the development of Analytic Philosophy, the sub-discipline. I, at least, was surprised to learn that Neurath was also a major innovator in the history of graphic design, as leader of the team that developed Isotype over the 1920s. Isotype's purpose was to represent literally the subject matter of a statistical graph with pictograms. That way, people would more easily understand the practical meaning of those facts for their lives. Labelled and coloured bars and lines, Neurath and his collaborators thought, were too abstract to communicate efficiently all that one needed to know.

Dick includes a striking example of Isotype from 1936, a bar graph of births and deaths in Germany over four periods of four years each: 1911-14, 1915-18, 1919-22, and 1923-26. For each period, the bar representing deaths is made of black coffins with little white crosses on them, and the bar representing births is made of pink fetuses. If this had been a conventional bar graph, it would have surely been impactful to see the 'total deaths' bar so much higher than 'total births' over the years of the First World War. But the obviousness of the deaths bar literally made of coffins towering over the babies of the births bar delivers a far more visceral emotional impact.

Displaying statistics in such literal symbols was how Neurath wanted to educate people in the real material significance of often complex facts and data about society-wide and planetary events and systems. His innovation was using cartoon-like imagery to provoke visceral emotional responses to data, which, if represented most abstractly, would lack the necessary triggers for psychological significance.

The psychological significance of that chart of German births and deaths can also ground further progress in one's own understanding. We feel, through an evocative image, the emotional impact of death. We think through how that emotional impact has been compounded from death after death after death, the everyday horror of frustration as their own king kept conscripting more young men to die in horrific violence. That one emotional trigger is enough to understand the social malaise which rose up in the 1918 revolutions that forced the king and government to capitulate, abdicate, and resign. Statistical fact presented with psychological triggers appropriate to the subject matter has improved our political knowledge.

**The Power of Images to Make Political Imperatives**

While Isotype infographics have such potential, and Dick even includes an example of Isotype in action that shows it, his analysis focusses on their drawbacks. The cartoon images, when displaying actual statistical data, force rounding to very high numbers. In that bar graph of German births and deaths, each coffin and baby represents many tens of thousands dead and born. Making the images small enough to display nuanced numbers would pixellate them literally beyond recognition.

Yet his analysis still shows the power that Isotype infographics can have. Appearing in the first years of the Nazi regime, that infographic of changes in Germany's birth-to-death ratios would have touched a strong nerve for German people. In the first years of the Nazi regime, the wretched legacy of the First World War loomed large in German people's thinking. But Dick passes over the story of how Isotype and other infographics told the German story in that country's news media because of his historical focus only on the British story. So the reader does not even learn the use and public significance of these graphics in the country where they were developed.

The greatest success in Dick's book is his running analysis on the political power of infographics to communicate clearly on issues of public importance. It appears in his discussions of the first infographics, designed by Joseph Priestley and William Playfair in the 1700s for public education purposes, and the theme continues throughout. However,

because he limits the focus of his subject matter to the news media, readers never learn from him the impact of infographics in other politically relevant contexts and institutions.

One of his examples of a particular infographic shows this tension clearly: Dick discusses a map of Dublin (under UK rule at the time), produced in 1841 by the office of a public health advisor to the city. This was an annotated map, colour-coding regions and neighbourhoods according to particular features. In this case, the colour codes and annotations depict the levels of poverty by neighbourhood, and correlates them with sanitary conditions like the presence of open sewage in streets and yards, and how many homes have access to basic plumbing and septic infrastructure. It clearly showed that a Dubliner's access to sanitation was directly correlated with how wealthy you were. The higher the average wealth of a neighbourhood, the better the penetration of sanitation services.

Dick makes a point of how shocking this annotated map, backed up with actual government data about the conditions of homes in the city, scandalized the editors of the newspapers that dominated popular political and economic conversation in England. Central to his point is the conclusion that all these editors reached, independently: none of their papers must publish this map.

The editors and owners of the Fleet Street papers all had the same reasoning: If the wider British public were to see this government-produced map, it would give ample fuel to the social movement to provide proper services to the poor and otherwise alleviate poverty and its attendant suffering. For the editors of Fleet Street, this was literally a seditious proposition.

**A Narrow Window Makes a Story Too Small**

So Dick demonstrates, in his historical research on how the Fleet Street newspapers received and repressed this public health data, the brutal conservatism of Britain's media barons and the cultures they inculcated in their newsrooms. However, he provides no information on how the British government itself received this information about the squalor of Dublin's poor, or any steps, if any at all, government officials might have taken to correct it.

This tension continues throughout Dick's book. *The Infographic*'s narrative sways back and forth between spreading its analysis into the social and political power of infographic communication, then restricting the subject matter to how the mainstream British press used infographics and related graphic communication. It results in a frustrating read, because Dick continues to hobble an ambitious analysis with a narrow scope.

Dick's self-limitation to the mainstream newspaper press of Britain similarly minimizes another politically relevant historical actor in the development and use of infographics: Florence Nightingale. Nightingale gained peculiar fame as one of the earliest media heroes. Her nursing work in the British Army was fairly ordinary, but the Fleet Street press capitalized on some of her unique aesthetic qualities (the face, the lamp) to make her a public image of English women's virtue. It is to Nightingale's credit that she took advantage of the

problematic propaganda to build an influential career as a public health officer with the British government.

Dick includes a detailed analysis of how Nightingale developed a variety of new infographic techniques to display data, as part of her reports on public health crises. Dick gives particular focus to the infographics she developed in her report on how soldiers suffered from unsanitary and unhygienic conditions during the Crimean War, both in field hospitals and on active deployment. He also gives an insightful analysis of the ideological motives behind those who suppressed much of Nightingale's data, and which relegated her infographic displays to the appendices of long public health reports in government archives, neutering their effects in popular education and discourse.

**Why Refuse These Visual Languages?**

From the first development of infographics, both progressive and conservative ideologues have sought to use them for their own purposes. Joseph Priestley, the premier English renaissance man of the 1700s, created the first annotated maps and graphic illustrations of historical periods. These were huge graphic displays, the size of a modern classroom whiteboard, that were designed as educational tools: students would gather around these displays, talking over and analyzing them together. Priestley incorporated these displays into his wider programs of popular education and advocacy for religious freedom. Dick contrasts this with another seminal infographic innovator, the Scottish Tory William Playfair, who developed many of the basic methods of displaying data with graphs. The goal of these graphs was to explain and garner popular support from the conservative government, at the time, of William Pitt the Younger.

The terms of this earliest conflict in the political deployment of the infographic went largely unchanged. Priestley stands for infographic communication as education in knowledge that liberates the marginalized, while Playfair was the first innovator in propagandistic infographics that distort the display of the facts to benefit the already-powerful. In each of the historical eras Dick explores—the era of a thousand pamphleteers, the Victorian-era consolidation of Fleet Street, the technological and mass-market revolutions of the last century—his historical narrative is how this ideological polarity in publishing shapes infographics' development.

Yet Dick also cannot ignore the institutions on which his history focusses: the Fleet Street newspapers. Here is the most critical problem that Dick's narrow focus causes his book. The historical narrative he sets up and tries to return to periodically is broken by the massive institutional and social weight and power of Fleet Street. This institution, more than any other, has advanced conservative and at times fascistic ideologies since the consolidation of the first generation of Britain's press barons. Focussing on the British news media as the only place he traces infographics' development, one cannot advance an interpretation of that history as a conflict of relative equals between progressive and conservative ideologies.

Worse, the real facts of Fleet Street culture undercut even Dick's choice of focus on the British mainstream press itself. Dick tries to set the book's narrative on how the tensions of progressive and conservative uses of infographics determined its development. But when he digs into the reasons why the Fleet Street papers refused infographics in their editions,

despite improving technology, lowering costs of graphic printing, and their efficacy as data propaganda, the explanation is almost pathetic. There was nothing about the ideological conflicts of progressive and conservative values in the use of infographics.

Simply, the Tory culture that dominated Britain's newspapers in the 1800s was utterly snobby about the use of images. Conservative British culture at the time supported visions of popular literacy grounded in either moralistic religion or moralistic nationalism. In essence, the popular view in Britain at the time was that reading should be universal, but that it should always be difficult, so as to encourage virtues of hard work and self-discipline in the labouring classes.

Infographics, being tools to make difficult data collections easy to understand, were anathema to this petty moralism. British culture abandoned this after the Victorian years, in favour of petty moralisms more appropriate to changing times, and likewise the infographic went mainstream in the British press. The ideological tension in infographics had nothing to do with what was essentially a matter of changing tastes in popular education.

**An Education Whose Unity Crumbles**

Like any good work of history, Murray Dick's *The Infographic* has left me better informed about its subject matter. It delivers the surprises, the new ways to understand events of the past and the lives of figures you thought you knew, as well as facts of history that you had never known or understood to be possible. But its flaws stake clear limitations of the book as well, because they are shortcomings in the fundamental components of historical composition: scope of research into the subject, and how the facts of the matter fit the themes the writer chooses to explain those facts.

As I hope I've explained, the facts of how and why infographics developed the way they did in the British news media from Joseph Priestley to the COVID pandemic, amount to a lot of complication. Dick centres in his analysis a tension in progressive and conservative or reactionary uses of infographic communications, between revealing uncomfortable truths and obscuring for the sake of comfort. But the real facts are sometimes more complex, and sometimes simpler than his most important theme can handle. I have discussed how infographics were ignored in Victorian-era newspapers not because of some ideological expression about the use of the methods themselves, but mere petty moralities about how understanding the world should be difficult.

The most important complexity of the facts that escapes Dick's analysis lies in its problems of scope. I have already discussed the limitations of his geographic choices, as when we lose track of what could have been a very interesting story of Isotype's influence in its birthplace Austria and throughout continental Europe. And this scope issue extends to other cultures that have innovated in graphic journalism and design. The newspapers and magazines of the United States contributed much to modern graphic design, in a culture fraught with fascinating ideological conflicts but they are absent from Dick's eye.

The greatest problem of scope, however, is one that you may have suspected when I mentioned the United States, because of its other famous publishing industry: advertising. In concentrating so exclusively on the role of infographics and graphic design in Britain's newsrooms, Dick utterly ignores how graphic design and infographics developed in Britain's advertising and marketing firms.

I understand his decision insofar as he is a historian. If you are going to trace a historical narrative that begins in 1700s Britain's pamphlet scene, then you will follow the Fleet Street giants that rose out of the competitive pamphlet market as that unfettered competition became an oligopoly. But the book purports to be about the development of the infographic, and there are more (and more significant) contributors to infographics, even just in Britain, than only the mainstream news media.

Marketing culture and its ideologies are pivotal in understanding graphic design since the start of the 20th century, which occupies a chapter of *The Infographic* equal to that on the Victorian years. It is especially important in our current century, when most graphic artists and interactive web designers build years of career experience in marketing and advertising firms, before major news platforms will typically consider hiring them.

As an academic work, Dick sets out clear terms of what his scope will be from the beginning, so that we as reviewers would understand why some subjects were included and some not. But as a book that is ostensibly for a wider reading public, narrowing his scope to a single industry in a single country will not tell what many of those readers will likely consider the whole story.