

Afghanistan: Visualising The Impact of 20 Years of War (Haddad, 2021), is an interactive journalism piece published by Al Jazeera and written by data journalist Mohammed Haddad. This piece offers great insight into the social and economic challenges presented by the conflict in Afghanistan and the greater Middle East region. Utilising various forms of data visualisation such as maps, bar graphs, infographics and charts to name a few, the piece effectively contextualises and conveys the detrimental effects of the war on the Afghanistan people, the economy and the country's infrastructure with a focus on data-driven insights.

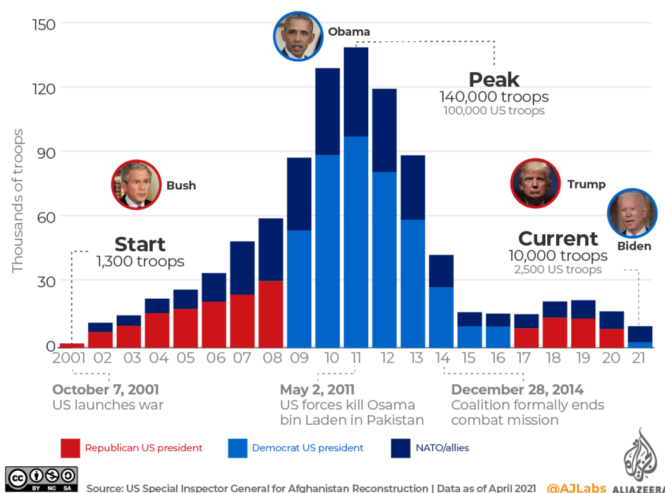
Data Visualization Techniques

This article makes great use of various Data Visualization techniques. From annotated maps and bar graphs to infographics and charts. An example of the use of bar graphs can be seen below:

AFGHANISTAN

The US and NATO's longest war

The war in Afghanistan spanned nearly 20 years and four US presidents.



(Haddad, 2021)

The graph above details the number of troops deployed in Afghanistan by the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), over a 20-year period starting from the beginning of the war in 2001. It further contextualises that data by providing the viewer with a key which shows how many troops were deployed by a Democrat American President, a Republican American President and NATO/allies. Furthermore, it highlights key events which can help the viewer understand the data. For example, it shows when the USA started the war in 2001, it shows when US Forces killed Osama bin Laden in 2011 and finally when the Coalition ended the combat mission in 2014. This adds an element of narration to the data presented as the viewer can then begin to make sense of the statistics and understand their significance.

The above is a great effective example of data visualisation in journalism. As outlined in *The Data Journalism Handbook* (Gray, Chambers, & Bounegru, 2012), effective data journalism relies on a combination of rigorous data analysis, clear visualisation, and compelling narrative." These are traits present throughout the article. These choices in Data Visualisation techniques align with Coddington's (2015) typology, distinguishing between data journalism and computational journalism. The use of maps and timelines exemplifies data journalism's strength in presenting spatial and temporal data, making complex information more accessible (Coddington, 2015).

Hermida and Gray (2012) highlight that data journalism represents a shift towards more analytical reporting. This is evident in Al Jazeera's piece, where traditional narrative reporting is supplemented with interactive data visualisations, allowing for a more nuanced exploration of the war's impact.

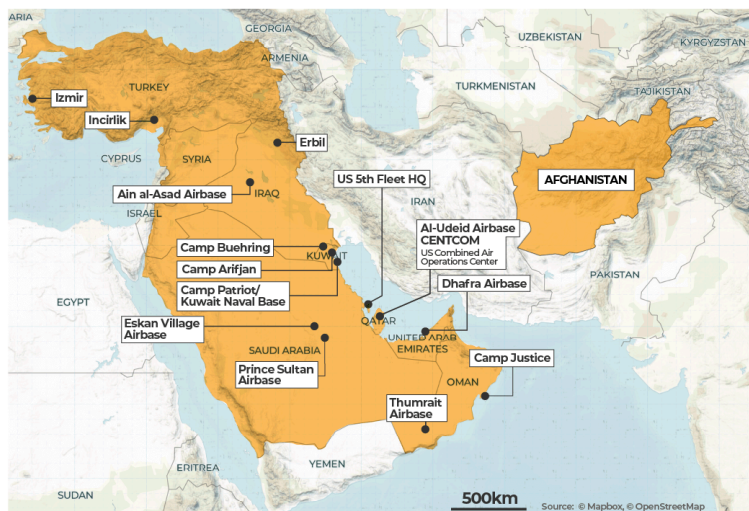
Interactivity and User Engagement

Interactivity plays a crucial role in the Al Jazeera article. The piece is designed to engage users through elements like annotated maps, timelines, and charts that allow for deeper exploration of the data. For instance, the map below depicts US Military bases in the Middle East Region within "striking distance" of Afghanistan:

AFGHANISTAN

US military presence in the region

Several countries in the Middle East are home to US air and naval bases **within striking distance** of Afghanistan.



Source: Al Jazeera, US Congressional Research Service

@AJLabs ALJAZEERA

(Haddad, 2021)

This data is presented in the context that even though the USA may have pulled out of Afghanistan, they do still have a great presence in the region. This helps to create a narrative regarding the subject as discourse surrounding the future of the conflict in the region is sparked.

The effectiveness of these interactive elements is underscored by Anderson's (2018) assertion that data journalism aims for precision and user engagement through detailed data presentation. The interactivity in Haddad's piece not only enhances user engagement but also aids in data interpretation and comprehension. Users are not just passive consumers of information; they actively participate by exploring different facets of the data.

UI/UX Design Principles

The design of the Al Jazeera piece adheres to several important UI/UX design principles, which significantly enhance the user experience. One key principle is consistency, which is maintained through a uniform colour palette and design language. This consistency helps users easily navigate the various visualisations without having to adjust to new design elements on each page.

Visual hierarchy is another principle effectively applied in this piece. Important data points, such as casualty figures or economic losses, are highlighted using contrasting colours and larger fonts. This ensures that the most critical information is immediately visible to the user, drawing their attention to the key insights of the article.

Furthermore, the navigation is intuitive, with clear visual cues that guide users on how to interact with the different elements. It also contains images from the conflict, such as the one below, which helps to immerse the viewer further into the subject matter. This aligns with Lewis and Westlund's (2015) emphasis on the importance of multidisciplinary collaboration in data journalism. The seamless integration of design and data analysis in Haddad's piece reflects effective collaboration between journalists, data analysts, and UI/UX designers.



(Haddad, 2021)

The influence of UI/UX design on user behaviour and understanding cannot be overstated. When the interface is intuitive and visually appealing, users engage more deeply with the content. As Gray, Chambers, and Bounegru (2012) suggest in The Data Journalism Handbook, effective data visualisation requires not just accurate data but also a well-thought-out design that facilitates user engagement and comprehension.

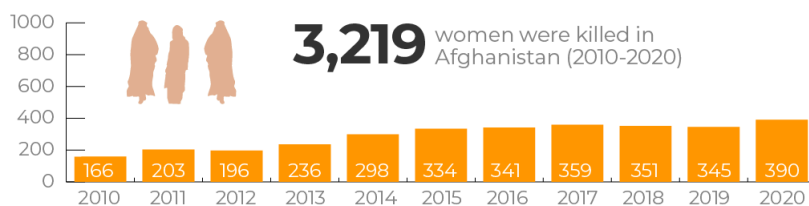
Data-Driven Storytelling

Data-driven storytelling is at the heart of Al Jazeera's piece. The narrative is constructed around the interactive timeline, which anchors the story by providing historical context to the visualised data. This timeline not only presents key events but also links them to the broader trends in the data, such as increases in troop deployments or spikes in casualty numbers, as seen below:

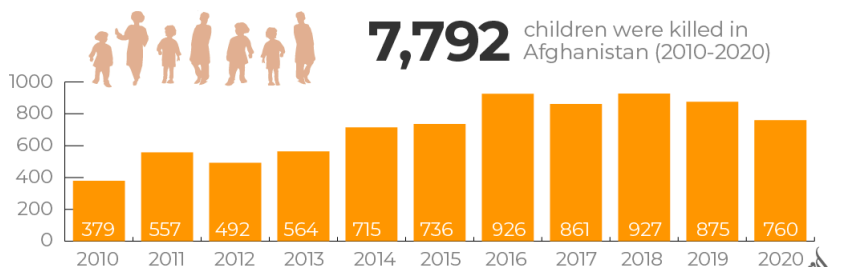
AFGHANISTAN

Attacks against women and children

2020 was the deadliest year over the past decade for women in Afghanistan with **390 deaths recorded**.



Afghanistan continues to be one of the **deadliest places in the world to be a child**.



Death tolls prior to 2009 do not follow a consistent methodology and have thus been excluded.
Source: UNAMA | Data as of February, 2021

@AJLabs ALJAZEERA

Parasite and Dagiral (2013) emphasise that data journalism should not only present data but also craft a compelling story that helps users make sense of the information. This is especially true In Haddad's piece, the trends and data depicted are contextualised in the context of events that occurred during the conflict, such as the killing of Osama bin Laden, the various US government administrations and much more.

One could argue that data journalism represents a shift towards more analytical reporting, and this can be seen in Haddad's piece. The analytical approach is further entrenched in the selection of data used. As seen in the graph above, death tolls before 2009 were omitted due to the quality of the data, thus it is clear that the article aims to accurately report and visualise data which contextualises the conflict in Afghanistan. This adds a layer of credibility to the article and renders it effective.

Emotional Impact

The emotional weight of the article is palpable as it conveys the harrowing toll of 20 years of conflict on Afghanistan's people, economy, and infrastructure. Through the use of evocative images and interactive data visualisations, the piece allows readers to connect personally with the stark realities of war. The visual representation of casualties, economic devastation, and the ongoing military presence fosters a deep sense of empathy and sorrow. The narrative does not merely present statistics; it humanises the conflict by illustrating the immense suffering endured by ordinary Afghans, making the reader acutely aware of the human cost of geopolitical decisions.

"Hassenzahl and Tractinsky (2006) emphasise the role of design in shaping the emotional experience of users, highlighting that well-designed digital content can enhance the emotional connection between the user and the material. In the Al Jazeera piece, the careful arrangement of visual elements contributes to a reflective and sombre mood, aligning with the serious nature of the content. This emotional design is crucial for engaging users on a deeper level, as it not only informs them but also evokes empathy and understanding of the war's impact."

Key Takeaways

The article by Mohammed Haddad effectively highlights the profound socio-economic consequences of the war in Afghanistan, underscoring the intricate relationship between political decisions and their long-term impacts on a nation. Key takeaways include the scale of military involvement by the U.S. and NATO, the devastating casualty rates, and the ongoing economic challenges faced by the region. The meticulous selection and presentation of data, bolstered by interactive elements, offer a nuanced understanding of how the war has shaped Afghanistan's present and future. The piece exemplifies the power of data-driven journalism to not only inform but also engage readers, allowing them to explore the conflict from multiple perspectives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Mohammed Haddad's article on the impact of 20 years of war in Afghanistan serves as a powerful testament to the capabilities of data journalism in unravelling the intricate and often overwhelming narratives of prolonged conflict.

Through the strategic use of interactive data visualisations, such as maps, timelines, and bar graphs, the article transcends traditional reporting, offering readers a multidimensional perspective on the profound effects of the war on Afghanistan's people, economy, and infrastructure. The piece masterfully combines rigorous data analysis with compelling storytelling, making complex information not only accessible but also deeply resonant.

Haddad's work exemplifies the essential role that design and interactivity play in enhancing user engagement. By adhering to key UI/UX principles—such as consistency in design, intuitive navigation, and effective visual hierarchy—the article ensures that readers can explore and comprehend the data with ease, while also fostering an emotional connection to the material. The careful selection of data, grounded in accuracy and relevance, further reinforces the article's credibility, allowing it to present a balanced yet impactful narrative that highlights both the human and economic costs of the conflict.

This article underscores the transformative potential of data journalism in the digital age, where the convergence of data, design, and narrative can lead to a more informed and empathetic public discourse. Haddad's work not only educates readers about the historical and ongoing impacts of the war in Afghanistan but also invites them to actively engage with the story, making it a vital resource for understanding the complexities of global issues. Ultimately, this piece stands as a significant contribution to the field of journalism, illustrating how data-driven storytelling can bring clarity and humanity to even the most challenging topics.

Bibliography:

Anderson, C.W. (2018) *Apostles of certainty: Data Journalism and the politics of doubt*, OUP Academic. Available at: <https://academic.oup.com/book/8267> (Accessed: 02 September 2024).

Bounegru, L., Chambers, L. and Gray, J. (2012) *The data journalism handbook*. Available at: <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9789048542079/pdf?licenseType=open-access> (Accessed: 01 September 2024).

Coddington, M. (2015) *Clarifying Journalism's Quantitative Turn A typology for evaluating data journalism, computational journalism, and computer-assisted reporting*. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/276168177_Clarifying_Journalism's_Quantitative_Turn (Accessed: 02 September 2024).

Grant, W. (2018) *101 UX principles: A definitive design guide*, Google Books. Available at: https://books.google.com/books/about/101_UX_Principles.html?id=QMhsDwAAQBAJ (Accessed: 02 September 2024).

Haddad, M. (2021) *Afghanistan: Visualising the impact of 20 years of War*, *Visualising the impact of 20 years of war | Al Jazeera English*. Available at: <https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2021/afghanistan-visualising-impact-of-war/index.html> (Accessed: 01 September 2024).

Hassenzahl, M. and Tractinsky, N. (2006) *User experience - a research agenda*, *Issuu*. Available at: https://issuu.com/hassenzahl/docs/ux_a_research_agenda/2 (Accessed: 02 September 2024).

Lewis, S. and Westlund, O. (2014) *Actors, actants, audiences, and activities in cross-media news work: A matrix and a research agenda*, *Actors, Actants, Audiences, and Activities in Cross Media News Work A matrix and a research agenda*. Available at: <https://conservancy.umn.edu/handle/11299/164093> (Accessed: 02 September 2024).

Parasie, S. and Dagiral, E. (2013) (PDF) *data-driven journalism and the public good: "computer-assisted-reporters" and "programmer-journalists" in Chicago*. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258173962_Data-driven_journalism_and_the_public_good_Computer-assisted-reporters_and_programmer-journalists_in_Chicago (Accessed: 02 September 2024).