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*Duncan Swain and Rebecca Conroy are growing their creative business by finding and visualising stories among the ever present pockets of data that our modern lives emit*

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rom emojis to Snapchat selfies, the way we communicate has become increasingly centred around images, with our preference for pictures superseding talking and text. Information design speaks to a culture that values visuals, and the recently rebranded Beyond Words studio is dedicated to designing infographics, visualisations and installations across all platforms, for a client list that includes the likes of Channel 4, Facebook and TfL.

'Information design is about communicating effectively visually', says co-founder Duncan Swain. '"A picture paints a thousand words" may be a hackneyed phrase, but information design engages our acute visual abilities, and shortcuts messages to the brain.'

Initially founded as the commercial arm of the popular data vis blog *Information is Beautiful*, Beyond Words works closely with companies seeking to better understand data – using it to aid internal decision-making and effectively communicate information in external marketing efforts.

Client work comes with its own set of design challenges, particular to data vis. 'We find that corporate guidelines largely don't take into account the range of colours that you need to use within data visualisation', he explains. 'Clients will often only use two or three different core colours in their brand, and that doesn't work for data visualisation.'

'When you're trying to represent multiple categories within data, colour becomes incredibly important.' A single visualisation requires a broad range of colours that can easily be distinguished from one another at a glance, and defining a palette of 10–15 different colours is a fundamental part of the design process.

In tandem with design, storytelling also has a significant part to play. Beyond creating something beautiful to look at, the studio works to identify stories that lie dormant within data sets and bring them to life in a way that's easy to understand and impossible not to engage with. As Duncan explains: 'For us, data vis is about spotting patterns, relationships, trends and narratives, and building structure, hierarchy and beautiful design around them to make them compelling for as many people as possible.'

Having both worked at the BBC for more than 15 years, Duncan and co-founder Rebecca Conroy's narrative-led approach has also been influenced by their time as journalists at the broadcaster. 'The BBC's values – to inform, educate and entertain – alongside a journalistic search for truth, honesty and impartiality, are key to what we do', he says.

'All our work is designed to teach the viewer something – whether it's how much gold we've accumulated in our bodies, the furthest distance a man-made object has travelled in space, or how many millions of transactions Visa processes in a day.'

Recent output for Visa is a ripe illustration of the way the studio successfully brings design and storytelling together. Entitled 'A day in the life of Visa', the project involved aggregating data about millions of cross-border transactions made in multiple currencies to create a snapshot of consumer spending around the world. As well as comparing behaviours between different countries and cities, the piece uncovered some intriguing insights – from the number of treats bought at bakeries by sweet-toothed Sao Paulo residents, to the popularity of train travel across India.

Overloaded with information; skeptical or distrustful of the way it's portrayed by mainstream media; or simply bored senseless by the way it's presented – we too often find information overwhelming, or view it with suspicion or disinterest. Done well, Duncan explains, data vis has the ability to make vast swathes of dense and inaccessible data clearer, more digestible and infinitely more engaging, bringing to light new stories or uncovering previously unknown insights. Ultimately, data visualisation has the ability to help redefine our sometimes fraught relationship with information.

As information design continues to evolve, people are looking to engage with data in evermore interactive ways. Rather than following a single, static and linear narrative dictated by designers, we are instead seeking to explore data sets ourselves, using visualisations as tools through which to filter, manipulate and shape data in ways that are most interesting and meaningful to us. Or as Duncan puts it: 'People can construct their own narrative as they dig through the data.'

To allow for this exploration, much of the studio's work involves developing interactive visualisations that allow multiple narratives to be told in tandem. As Duncan describes, 'We look for supplementary data sets we can bring in, that might provide more context or shine a slightly different light on the focal data set.'

Because they deal with data, there's a tendency to treat visualisations as somehow entirely impartial, and consider them through a less critical lens. While interactive visualisations aim at impartiality by allowing us to tell multiple sides of the same story, interpretation still plays a part. 'The data you're visualising isn't just cold, hard numbers,' Duncan affirms, 'sometimes it's much more subjective than objective, and there's no essential right or wrong. You have to work hard to try and extract your own thoughts, feelings and biases.'

The process is a complex one, calling for an understanding of data science and analysis, journalism and storytelling, design and creativity. With these challenges in mind, Duncan and Rebecca have built a culture at Beyond Words that aims to cultivate this kind of multidisciplinary thinking and learning amongst their team of designers, developers, researchers, writers and animators. 'We do a lot of knowledge sharing, but rely on people being curious about the history and methodology of what we do, so that they can self-educate too.'

To ask Duncan what he's learnt throughout his years as a practitioner prompts a remarkable and perhaps surprisingly personal answer, that highlights how much we stand to learn from data.

'Some of the most important work I've done over the last few years is tracking my own data around migraines and blood pressure', he responds. 'By tracking and visualising that data, and monitoring the effects of lots of different medications accurately and minutely, I've been able to better control my blood pressure and stop my migraines after 40 years.'

Until 2014, information designer Nicholas Felton famously published personal annual reports, collecting and visualising the minutiae of his everyday life via maps, graphs and stats. Since his project began in 2005, self-tracking tools have advanced incredibly, with a host of apps and wearables – from Fitbit to SleepCycle – allowing us to more easily capture a plethora of personal data about where we go, what we eat, how we feel and more.

Born in the States, the Quantified Self movement is dedicated to this same pursuit, seeking to use technology to track and collate personal data that relates to daily life. The goal is to gain greater knowledge of ourselves, our minds and our bodies, to empower us to exert greater control over our own productivity, health, wellbeing and even happiness.

'We can learn so much from data vis', Duncan believes. 'Whether it's about the world around us and what's happening within it, or something far more personal.'
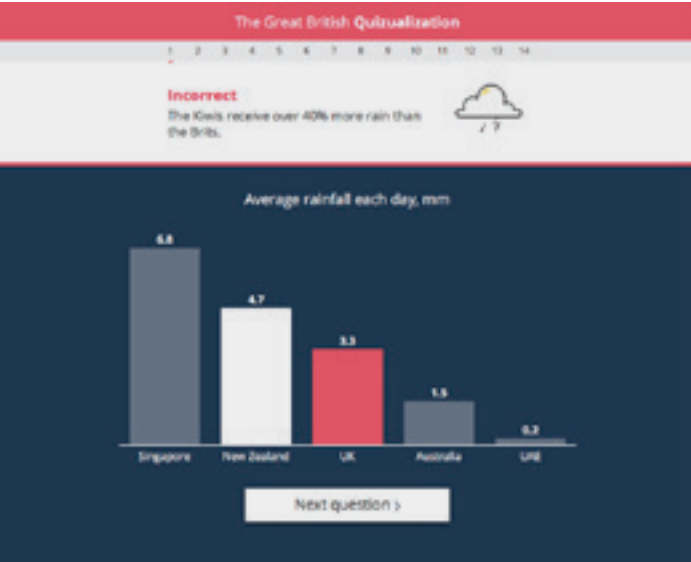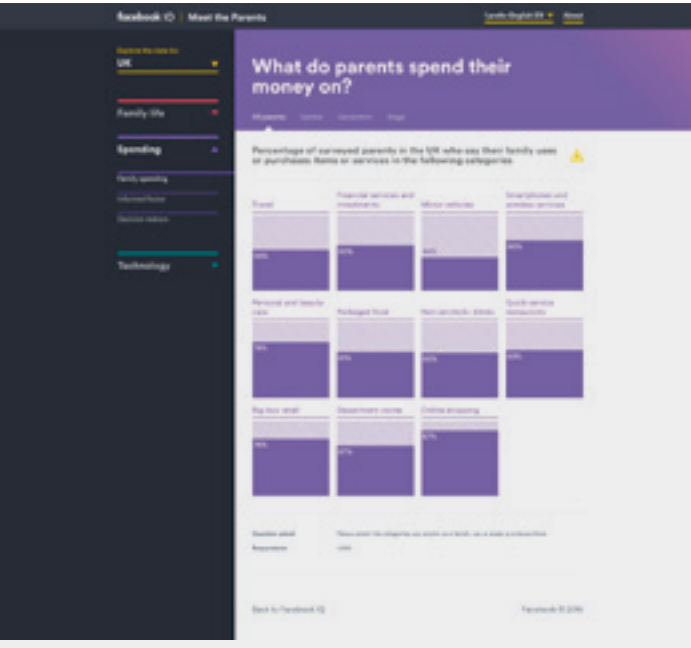
**Left:**
Project detail, Beyond Words