

Interactive Visualization of Time-Dependent Bipartite Graphs

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores novel techniques for visualizing temporal bigraphs, with a specific focus on the “Media Transparency Database Austria”. Established in 2011 by Austrian law, this dataset records quarterly advertising expenditures of governmental organizations across various media outlets. Our study aims to develop an effective, interactive visualization that allows users to explore patterns, trends and anomalies.

We survey state-of-the-art approaches for visualizing dynamic graphs, including animated node-link diagrams, timeline-based representations and hybrid techniques. Building on these methods, we propose a novel interactive visualization that combines temporal bigraph representations. Our design aims to provide both clear overviews and detailed analysis capabilities, allowing users to explore the evolution of advertising expenditures over time and the relationships between public entities and media outlets. We discuss potential evaluation strategies for assessing the effectiveness of our visualization and outline expected outcomes. This work contributes to the field of dynamic graph visualization while demonstrating its practical application in government transparency and policy analysis.

Index Terms: Interactive Visualization, Temporal Graphs, Bipartite Graphs, Media Transparency, Public Policy, Government Spending

1 INTRODUCTION

Effective visualization of temporal graphs can reveal valuable insights such as patterns, trends, and anomalies that might otherwise remain hidden in raw data. This allows researchers, analysts, and decision-makers to quickly grasp evolving relationships, identify critical points of change, and make data-driven decisions.

In the context of global warming, multi-temporal scale visualizations of carbon emissions data can provide valuable insights for decision-makers, as demonstrated by Ma et al. [5]. In logistics, these visualizations can help optimize supply chain operations and identify inefficiencies [13] [8]. For social networks, they can illuminate user interactions and information spread. In public policy, temporal graph visualizations can aid in tracking disease spread, monitoring resource allocation and analyzing policy impacts [1]. These examples demonstrate how temporal graph visualizations compress temporal network data into intuitive representations. And as the volume and complexity of temporal data continue to grow across various domains, the development and application of effective visualization techniques for temporal graphs will likely become increasingly important.

As a practical example this paper explores various techniques for interactive visualization of time-dependent and bipartite graphs, using the “Media Transparency Database Austria” [4].

Time-dependent graphs or temporal graphs are structures that evolve over time, with nodes and edges changing as time progresses. These graphs are crucial for representing dynamic systems and processes that unfold chronologically. They allow us to observe patterns, trends, and changes in relationships between entities over

different time periods [12]. One specific type of temporal graph that has gained prominence is the bipartite graph. **Bipartite** graphs or bigraphs consist of two distinct sets of nodes, with connections only existing between nodes from different sets, but not within the same set. If the two subsets have equal cardinality (balanced bigraph) and each node in one subset is connected to every node in the other subset, the graph is called a complete bigraph [2]. These graphs are particularly useful for modeling relationships between two different types of entities, such as public authorities and their advertising expenditures. Due to their scale and complexity, time-dependent and bipartite graphs can be challenging to visualize effectively. To make sense of the “Media Transparency Database Austria”, which contains thousands of entries over multiple years, we need to design scalable and **interactive visualizations** that allow users to explore the data, for example, by filtering, zooming, and selecting specific time periods or entities.

The “Media Transparency Database Austria” [4] or **MT dataset** for short is a public repository that records the advertising expenses of public authorities in Austria. The MT dataset has gained popularity in Austria due to its role in increasing transparency around the use of taxpayers’ money for advertisements. Following allegations of misuse, the Austrian National Council passed the “Media Transparency Act” in 2011, requiring public institutions and certain companies to report their media expenditure quarterly. This legislation aims to make information easily accessible to citizens, thereby promoting open government initiatives and enhancing public accountability. It provides a rich dataset that can be represented as both a time-dependent and bipartite graph structure. By visualizing this data – although not the focus of this paper – we can gain insights into how public authorities allocate advertising budgets, which media outlets receive the most / least funding, how both the political and media landscapes evolve over time and mutually influence each other. This information can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of public advertising campaigns, identify potential biases and inform public policy decisions.

This paper aims to combine state-of-the-art techniques and approaches for designing interactive visualizations of time-dependent and bipartite graphs to propose a final design for the MT dataset. We will focus on clear, uncluttered overviews while maximizing information content and propose a design that allows users to interact with the data intuitively. Additionally, we will consider how our proposed visualization could be evaluated and what results we expect to achieve.

2 RELATED WORK

In this section, we will explore existing solutions for visualizing time-dependent and bipartite graphs, focusing on their strengths, weaknesses and suitability to the MT dataset. We can maximize suitability by focusing on existing research on our dataset, as they directly address our unique challenges. Fortunately the MT dataset has been a very popular choice for information visualization research in Austria starting from its inception in 2011. We will look at the most relevant projects in a chronological order.

2.1 Medientransparenz Project (2015 - 2024)

In 2015, students at the Applied University of Joanneum were the first to work on the MT Dataset [6], which eventually evolved into

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the [Medientransparenz project](#) – the most comprehensive and up-to-date visualization of the MT Dataset. This project represents the cumulative effort of over 12 students’ course projects and master theses over the past 13 years, coordinated by Peter Salhofer. With generous funding from the Austrian government, it led to a direct collaboration with the Austrian Regulatory Authority for Broadcasting and Telecommunications (RTR) and the Austrian Communications Authority (KommAustria), who are responsible for the MT Dataset [4].

On January 23 2024, this collaboration resulted in the project being forked into the [official Medientransparenz project](#), maintained by the RTR. The official Medientransparenz project is a restricted version of the original, featuring a different color palette and a limited set of features and datasets due to legal constraints applicable to KommAustria/RTR. For example, they are only permitted to visualize data from 2020 onwards. However, the original project remains unconstrained, actively maintained, and is self-described as a “Community Edition with extended data and functionality”, which will be the focus of our analysis and the one we will refer to as the Medientransparenz project from now on.

The Medientransparenz project is a single-page web-application based on Google’s material design framework. On the initial load of the webpage you have to wait an extended time period for it to load. It uses a vertical tab as a navigation menu, among others linking to the subpages “Overview”, “Top Values” and “Flows” which provide different views of the data.

The “Overview” page shows multiple views, accessible by scrolling. Each view provides access to 3 different visualizations of the same data subset by click on the corresponding icons: Line charts, bar charts and stacked bar charts. The goal of all these views is to provide a high-level overview of the data, showing the total spending of all entities over time, per type of spending. The default view is the bar chart displaying multiple color encoded bars per year, to enable the user to i.e. compare the advertising vs. funding related spendings. As you progress through the views, the sub-categories of the data are further broken down, allowing for more detailed insights.

The “Top Values” page presents a complex hierarchical dataset using a modified pie chart structure, commonly referred to as a sunburst diagram or multilevel pie chart. A configuration tab on top of the page allows the user to select whether they’re interested in advertising spending or subsidies, funders or recipients, the cut-off rank and year as well as the different geographical regions. The design employs a radial layout to display hierarchical data, with the innermost ring representing the highest level of the hierarchy and subsequent outer rings showing more granular subcategories. However, it also demonstrates the challenges of presenting dense, multilevel information in a static, two-dimensional format which pose challenges in terms of readability and immediate comprehension. The use of color coding aids in category differentiation, but the large number of segments and varying text orientations may require significant cognitive effort from the viewer to fully interpret the data relationships, especially as the symbols overlap. Fortunately a tooltip and highlight feature is available to provide additional information on hover.

The third and final page, “Flows”, has a very similar filter configuration to the “Top Values” page, but instead of a sunburst diagram it uses a sankey diagram, a type of flow visualization that represents the distribution and flow of resources or information from one set of values to another. In this case the flow of money from funders to recipients, with the width of the lines representing the amount of money transferred. The user can filter the data by year, region, and type of spending. This kind of visualization is excellent for bipartite graphs for obvious reasons, but it can be difficult to interpret for users unfamiliar with the concept – but it scales well and a tooltip is available to provide additional information on hover to help resolve

visual ambiguities. But although the sankey diagram is almost perfect for bipartite graphs, it is not ideal for time-dependent graphs, as it doesn’t show the evolution of the data over time and requires the user to manually change the year to see the changes. At this point it is also worth noting that although the sunburst diagram was preferred to the sankey diagram in the project maintained by the RTR and KommAustria due to its more intuitive nature, it is unable to capture the relationships in a bipartite graph as well as the sankey diagram can. The reason for this is unclear.

In conclusion this project provides a solid foundation for visualizing the MT dataset, with a focus on providing clear overviews and detailed insights. However, the lack of a direct comparison tool for actors and time spans, represents a missed opportunity for more sophisticated data analysis.

2.2 VDA Student Projects (2017)

Jüttner et al. [3] present an interactive visualization approach specifically designed for the MT dataset that directly addresses our unique challenges. They describe a visualization approach in which different aspects of the data are simultaneously presented through interactive and interlinked sub-visualizations, called views. These multiple views work in concert, all showing different aspects of the same data and being updated in sync when users interact with any of them. This is commonly referred to as a “multiple coordinated views” or “*coordinated multiple views*” (CMV) [7] visualization and aligns well with the popular design principle of “Eyes beat memory” by Tamara Munzner. This principle suggests that users can more effectively understand data when they can see it, rather than having to remember it from a previous view. Their visualization concept provides both broad overviews (i.e. overall spending patterns) and detailed insights (i.e. drill down into specific actors or time periods). It consists of elements, including an overview bar chart, an alphabetically ordered, searchable list of actors, a tree-like graph displaying connections between selected actors and detailed bar charts showing quarterly spending and media-specific expenses.

This ability to interactively filter data, search for specific actors, and update charts based on user selections is a great strength of their approach. It allows users to explore the data in a non-linear fashion, focusing on specific aspects of the data that interest them.

However, the approach also has some limitations. The authors acknowledge performance issues especially on startup as their web-based `d3.js` implementation doesn’t scale well with the given dataset size. This could potentially hinder user experience, especially for users with slower internet connections or less powerful devices. Additionally, the lack of advanced features like brushing, zooming, and direct comparison tools for actors and time spans, as mentioned by the authors, represents a missed opportunity for more sophisticated data analysis.

In conclusion while Jüttner et al.’s approach provides a solid foundation through its coordinated multiple views design, it doesn’t leverage the temporal and bipartite nature of the data to its full potential.

After some research, we found that Jüttner et al.’s work was part of a student project at the University of Vienna in 2016 WS [9] before being published in 2017. This context is important to note as it suggests that other students might have also worked on similar projects during that time. By modifying the URL suffix of the original project, we were able to find several other student projects from the same year that also explored the MT dataset and used interactive CMV visualizations that allow to drill down into the data, but each with unique approaches and interesting insights. We also learned that the deadlines for these projects were on the 21st of January 2017, which is why they were all published around the same time. Two of these projects, in particular, caught our attention.

One project [10] used a bundled edge graph to provide a detailed view of individual transactions between entities, a packed bubble

chart and treemap to provide overviews of the highest transactions and relative proportions and a line chart that allows users to see trends over time. Additionally each graph would highlight connections on mouseover in the bundled edge graph.

Notable weaknesses however include the lack of cross-filtering between the bundled edge graph and the other visualizations, requiring users to apply filters separately. This can be cumbersome and potentially confusing. The default view can also be overwhelming due to the large amount of data, making it initially difficult for users to gain clear insights. Performance issues with loading large datasets using `d3.js`, particularly in the bundled edge graph, are another weakness. Also the decision to display nodes as circles without text descriptions when there are more than 250 nodes is a compromise that may not be ideal for all use cases.

Another project [11] took a different approach, aiming for simplicity and information density. They used a matrix view to show the relationships between entities and media outlets. The project also included a stacked bar chart to show the distribution of spending across media outlets and a timeline view to show spending trends over time. The matrix view in particular is a unique, effective and compact way to visualize bipartite relationships, providing a clear and information-dense representation of the data.

The reliance on basic chart types however limits the ability to show more complex relationships or patterns in the data which may be appropriate for a general audience but could limit its utility for expert users. The stacked bar charts can be difficult to interpret precisely. The matrix view, while information-dense, may be overwhelming for some users.

3 VISUAL ENCODING AND INTERACTION DESIGN

4 IMPLEMENTATION

5 EVALUATION

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