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Mini Assignment 1

PSYC 6135, Psychology of Data Visualization

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 I’m not the most artistic or creative person and when I’m tasked with a paint night with my partner or family, I generally need a reference that I try my best to follow or recreate. I see the same behaviour in my data visualizations – I think of plots that displayed similar data and use those as a reference, thinking ‘maybe that can be a nice way of showing my data’. I find data visualization can sometimes be an enigmatic beast when I am working with my own data. Sometimes, I have complex data that I want to display, and I have seen others display similar data but in not the most wonderous way. However, I default to the not-so-wonderous way because I have a hard time thinking of new ways to show the data. I have stumbled upon new ways of showing cool data just by virtue of trial and error, but I know I have much room for improvement.

As I read through the blogs and the papers from last week’s materials, one of the biggest battles I faced was my feelings around Howard Wainer’s emphasis on Tufte’s data density index (ddi) and the more data the better. I believe the importance of this metric changes with what data you are showing and what sort of story you are telling. I have seen many plots and figures that present a load of data in a small space (high ddi), and I did not gain a fraction of the understanding that the authors were hoping to share. On the contrary, I have seen plots with quite a small ddi where the story they presented was so clear and concise that I walked away with confidence in my understanding of the information. I don’t believe that high ddi is always a positive and that low ddi is always a negative.

One figure that I did not love from the blogs in the shared resources was the “The coronavirus has destroyed America’s job market” graph from the Medium “[The data visualizations that helped us understand 2020](https://uxdesign.cc/the-data-visualizations-that-helped-us-understand-2020-6447790f821)” article. I didn’t like it because their color spectrum did not have a neutral midpoint. I found it odd that between blue and red poles the midpoint was white, however, white didn’t fall in the middle of the spectrum. It is at maybe the 1/3 point. It's unclear to me whether white represents no change (as a midpoint between fewer claims or more claims) or if it represents a mild fewer claims, given it’s closer to the fewer claims pole.

Ultimately, I understand that there is a balance to the amount of data one presents in a plot and its interpretability and that there is an art to striking the perfect balance. As well, there are best-practices and rules that should generally be followed in data visualization, but again there is a balance between sticking to the rules and creating the most interpretable and representative plot. These are some of the skills that I hope to develop and foster in this class.