**A Critique of “China’s Back” by The Economist**

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URL: http://www.economist.com/news/finance-and-economics/21623758-chinas-back?fsrc=scn/fb/te/pe/ed/chinasbacklivechart#

This article from The Economist features a video infographic of the world’s economy in just over a minute. I completely love the piece for a variety of reasons, but also believe it could stand to use some improvements.

First, the best thing about the chart is it’s short-and-sweet nature. It packs a lot of punch into a brief time frame and still robustly tells a story. One of the most prominent and praiseworthy features of The Economist is its ability to boil down incredibly dense or complex topics to their essence and convey that information in a clear manner. They go above and beyond their usual greatness here by distilling the entire globe’s economy from the first century until now into a single bar chart that is fun to watch. Nice.

Second, in spite the simplicity of the piece, it tells a powerful story and makes a brilliant point: China took over America’s economy in terms of size of purchasing-power-parity, but China has excelled the United States and other countries (when the U.S. didn’t exist) for most of recorded history – fascinating! It puts everything into perspective. I believe this is an instance of a data visualization telling something better than a story or a billion explainer pieces could.

As far as the animation and presentation of the piece, I like that it starts with an overall view of what they’re going to show, so you go into it with an idea. This could be good to keep in mind when doing any sort of animated data visualization – get a peek at where you’re going before you take it all away and actually go there could cement it in people’s mind and keep them interested, because they kind of have an idea of where you’re going and don’t have to work so hard at processing it as they’re listening to your voiceover and watching where the pieces go.

The voiceover in this piece is also good because it lets you know what’s going on along with important snippets of why it happened, again without going into too much detail and bogging you down in information. It clusters information in places too when they think it’s important to point that out – for instance saying “over the next centuries three European powers vied for third place.” Nice to add a little interest so it’s not just rattling off what is happening, as another extreme. “America’s preeminence is over,” in a British accent, adds a good concluding flourish to the piece, and makes their case closed. Our world resembles the modern world, and we’re full circle – fun to think about.

Finally, critiques. What I didn’t like about this piece was I think it sacrificed for brevity some helpful information. For instance, it doesn’t really explain to me how they know this for sure. I know it’s The Economist and their readers probably know what “purchasing-power-parity” is, but I don’t and I wish there was a brief bit about it to fill in some blanks there. On a similar note, I’m not sure where or how they got the information. It says they literally got it from the IMF and Angus Maddison, but I’m not sure how they got GDP about first-century Roman Empire, for instance. I’m not sure how the IMF got that information or whether we’re comparing apples and apples. Those countries may have been the largest in the world, but I’m not sure you can with great certainty stick them on a graph with 2015 data. However, since it’s The Economist and super smart people probably did it, I guess I’ll believe it.

Also, while I like the brevity, I think they also sacrifice a little story telling to make it short. And the piece probably doesn’t have the same appeal if they can’t call it “the world’s economy throughout history in one minute.” Then you just have a lecture on the world’s economy on your hands, and there are already many of those. However, it’s a little bare for a piece with as grandiose ambitions – I might have added some better graphics, or a tiny bit more explanation or interesting facts in there. Even if the narrator doesn’t voice them in his script, at least it would add slightly more interest than watching pieces of salmon and burgundy-colored blocks fly around. It’s just slightly too hard to configure which economies he is talking about while it’s going because of the speed, and some icons or graphics might have assisted.

Last, I would have done up this piece a little more in several areas. Maybe The Economist doesn’t realize how cool it is to a general audience because they already know these facts and data. But aside from the suggestions already discussed I would also probably have fleshed out the video with more text in the bottom. I want to read or know more about this after watching. The video could be supplemented with a little paragraph about the countries, perhaps, and what they were going through at the time. Why did one fall and one rise? What were their big products? How did they get rich or poor?

Admittedly that would take significantly more research and time to produce, but it would have made for a more interesting piece. It’s strength is that it makes one point – that China overtook the U.S. – in such a succinct fashion, but I think that is also its weakness. It could have given me a little more, and I think the topic of the story could really merit that type of treatment – almost a missed opportunity.