CS 171: HW 2
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Visualization A

This New York Times visualization aims to explain the spending of an average American to New York Times readers, who are, in general, a slightly more-educated but otherwise average sample of Americans. The visualization illustrates this data in two ways: size corresponds to the amount spent—how much people spend on a given item—whereas color corresponds to percent change in price per year—how much more (or less) people spend on a given item compared to last year. It's an interesting visualization once the viewer really spends time to get to know it, but at first glance it can be disorganized and overwhelming.

The data-to-ink ratio is quite high and it seems that the data is somewhat accurately represented; area accurately corresponds to the amount spent. However, the colors are somewhat deceiving as they range from -10 to +40 percent change, with similar saturation and lightness in colors that differ only in hue for the values of -10 and +40. To accurately represent inflation, it would have been useful to use a much lighter shade of blue for -10 than of red for +40.

Another problem, in my opinion, is the seemingly arbitrary use of shape. It is unclear why many of the categories have the irregular shapes that they do. It would have been clearer if a square or triangular grid were used, or perhaps there were some clear subdivision, such as if Food and Beverages fell into Healthy Beverages, Unhealthy Beverages, Vegetables, Meats, Grains, Snacks, etc., and then into specific items from there.

The concept behind the visualization is highly effective. It is simply small issues with the specific execution—namely color scaling and disorganization in shape—that mar an otherwise extremely interesting and informative and ultimately well-designed visualization.