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Critique 1

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**Critique of “A Masterclass in Election-Rigging” by The Guardian**

The story, “[A masterclass in election-rigging: How Republicans ‘dismembered’ a Democratic stronghold](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2022/jan/25/nashville-tennessee-gerrymandering-congress-republicans),” published in The Guardian, shows the power behind data journalism. The “visual guide” written and created by Andrew Witherspoon and Sam Levine takes readers through the impact of redrawing congressional district lines in Tennessee. The article explains that Tennessee lawmakers are hoping to change how district lines are drawn around Nashville, central Tennessee’s most progressive city. While nothing has been finalized, the article explains that the proposal is headed to the governor, who is expected to support the plan. This article begins with text explaining the plan before displaying an interactive map showing how precincts voted during the 2020 presidential election. This interactive piece captivated me as a reader and helped me better understand the issue at hand.

This article is part of a series called, “The Fight to Vote,” which explores ways in which voting rights are hindered in the U.S. Overall, I think this article does a superb job of explaining one example of this larger issue. As someone who is not from Tennessee, I think this article does a good job showing the reader why they should care. Nashville, which is within a district President Joe Biden won by roughly 24 points during the presidential election, may be divided into three separate districts. It is currently positioned in the fifth district. But under the plan, it would be split into the fifth, sixth and seventh districts.

Each map also shows a digestible amount of information. The journalists are careful to not overload each map with information. The important information pops. While this article is relatively short, each graphic contains what could be paragraphs worth of information. These types of stories are a nice change of pace from a more traditional, text-heavy story. In this case, data journalism is a valuable tool, helping explain complex information in a visual, more understandable way.

Scrolling through the interactive portion, it becomes clear that most of the precincts in Nashville voted for Biden. It’s also clear that most other precincts in central Tennessee voted for Trump. As mentioned at the bottom left of the graphic, the voter data was pulled from Redistricting Data Hub, the boundary lines were sourced from the Tennessee General Assembly, the poll margins were from Daily Kos and the projected margins were found on PlanScore. To me, this shows the substantial amount of research that went into making these maps. Considering how much information is presented in each map, I think the journalists did a great job of breaking it down. The captions that appear with each map also do a good job of summarizing the data in a couple sentences.

Including how many points Trump would have won each district by — if the proposed lines had been in place during the previous presidential election — is a strong use of data. The maps show the proposed lines and how people voted. These maps highlight how a district, which currently tends to vote Democrat and has a large number of voters of color, would be dismantled to ensure a Republican majority.

Scrolling through the piece, it becomes evident that these voters of color would be divided into the three proposed districts. If lawmakers were to go forward with this plan, these people would be separated into districts with a large number of white residents. As the article explains, this division would make “it more difficult for their voices to be heard.” This hard-hitting statement concludes the interactive component. I think the interactive component contains a solid amount of information that does not lose the reader, therefore making that last statement stand out.

The interactive component seamlessly transitions to the second half of the story, which addresses “outrage” to the plan. The reporters do a good job of incorporating reaction from both Democrats and Republicans, adding balance to the story. The emotional quotes, like the one from Odessa Kelly, a local activist, hit hard after scrolling through more straightforward, informational graphs. While this story is short, it’s successful at incorporating both hard facts (through the data) and emotion (through the quotes).

However, like many stories, I think there is room for improvement. Upon looking at the first map, I did not realize what exactly I was seeing. The map zooms in on central Tennessee, a shape I am unfamiliar with. However, in the bottom left corner, there’s a small diagram of the whole state highlighting which specific area is enlarged. I think it would have been helpful to make this key slightly larger so that it does not go unnoticed at first glance.

While Nashville stands out because it’s covered with blue dots, I think the font size should be larger to make it clearer. The word “Nashville” on the map is small as it is. If I was scrolling through this article quickly, I might not have noticed it, leading to possible confusion.

I also think there should have been a sentence or two about the larger story of gerrymandering. This story is specific to central Tennessee, but it does not address the national issue. I think a couple links to other stories about gerrymandering in The Guardian’s “The Fight to Vote” series would be of use. Additionally, I think it would have been beneficial for the journalists to explain how this proposed plan to redraw district lines could be prevented. The article opens the idea that it could be prevented, but I think a sentence explaining this further would be of merit.