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CS 171: Visualization
Homework for Module 4
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Storytelling Design Critique:

<http://www.syria-visualized.com/>

What is the message? What is the narrative?

The narrative follows the development of the civil war and refugee crisis in Syria. It follows the typical, “scrollytelling” format of data journalism, illustrating how protests rose during the Arab Spring in 2011 through the origins and spread of further violence, to the distribution and aid offered to refugees across international borders.

Given the mix of quantitative and qualitative data, including videos and sketches of refugees who have experienced these hardships, the website offers an empathetic and impactful look at the lasting effects of civil war.

In particular, analyze the main storytelling arc elements (Setting/Hook, Rising Insights, Aha Moment, Solution & Next Steps)

The website sets the stage by presenting some of the most jarring statistics associated with the Syrian Civil War and refugee crisis, followed by a video that shows all their visualizations. Then, the first and second visualizations offer rising insights into the causes and sources of local violence over a 4 year period, showing how these incidences steadily increased and spun a web of political, social, and economic issues.

To me, the “Aha!” moment comes when the story turns to the effect on civilians, including over 6,000 dead visualized over various demographics. While it isn’t the design team’s specific solution to the problem, their website presents the solution that many Syrians pursued: fleeing the country and seeking asylum elsewhere. Other countries in Western Asia and Europe opened their doors to these refugees in varying degrees. Yet one of the final quotes of the website criticizes the international community for not doing more to protect innocent civilians. A final timeline, which reiterates all the previous details, offers the viewer an opportunity to synthesize what they’ve learned and contemplate next steps.

What did you think worked well? What did not?

The individual visualizations were executed impressively well and used many of the CRAP and Gestalt principles effectively alongside unique methods of interactivity. I also appreciated that

the background remained black and white, allowing the colorful details of each visualization to have maximum impact. The inclusion of quotes was also a compelling method of storytelling; they supplemented the data with firsthand accounts of their message.

I felt that including the video at the beginning might be excessive in addition to the full website, since it reiterated many of the same points laid out over the “scrollytelling” format. Instead, I might suggest that the video be added to the end of the website where the timeline lives, possibly with a link to share this content to other social media channels. Otherwise, I think this was a very successful project and sets the bar high for our final projects!