

Why we visualise data

Motivation

Data visualisations can be a very efficient means of identifying patterns in data and conveying a message. The scientific aim of any visualisation is to allow the reader to understand data and extract information:

- intuitively;
- efficiently; and
- accurately.

It is important, when creating a visualisation, to consider the background of the reader or intended audience (Krause 2013). Interpretation is in the eye of the beholder, and a visualisation will only succeed at conveying its message if designed with its audience in mind.

A successful data visualisation will:

- **Grab attention** In a sea of text, a visualisation will stand out. If a reader is short on time or uncertain about whether a document is of interest, an attention-grabbing visualisation may entice them to start reading.
- **Improve access to information** Textual descriptions can be lengthy and hard to read, while skillfully created visualisations permit the extraction of key information more efficiently, making information extraction a fun task.
- **Increase precision** Textual descriptions are frequently less precise than a visual depiction showing data points and corresponding axes, while a text with too many precise numbers can make it hard to follow a line of argument.
- **Bolster credibility** While a textual summary provides a story, a visualisation of the data can add credibility to otherwise unsubstantiated claims: readers can see the numbers for themselves and arrive at the (same?) conclusions.
- **Summarise content** Visual displays allow for summarising complex textual content, aiding the reader in memorising key points.

For these reasons, data visualisations are key elements in almost any kind of publication – scientific papers, media reports, conference presentations, social media posts, video summaries, etc.

Tables, too, are a way to visualise data or statistics, and can be similarly important components of a publication. A table may in some cases visualise data better than a graphic. For example, five numbers are probably better displayed in a table than in a complex pie chart that uses colours, angles, and possibly shading and more than two dimensions.

A brief history of data visualisation

Data visualisation has been, for a long time, both a topic of scientific research and an evolving art form with a variety of high-impact applications.

In 1859, [Florence Nightingale](#), the founder of modern nursing, published her findings on the sanitary status of the British army during the war with Russia. She showed raw data as well as summary statistics in tables and charts (Nightingale, 1859). One chart in particular continues to be celebrated today: a polar area chart on the “causes of mortality in the army in the East”.

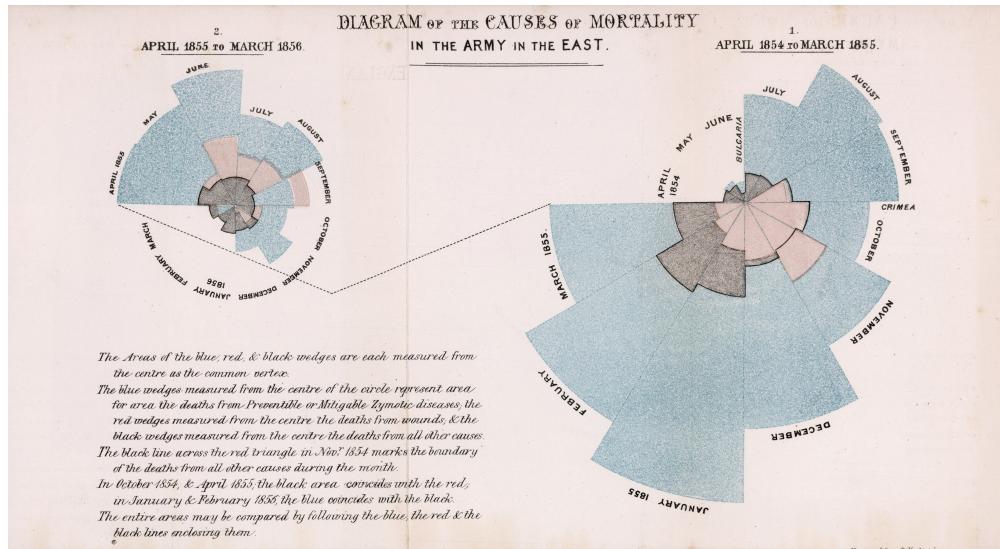


Figure 1: Florence Nightingale’s polar area chart, “Diagram of the causes of mortality in the army in the East”. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

What made Nightingale’s graphs “particularly iconic was their powerful use of visual rhetoric to make an argument about data” (Hedley 2020). This quality is also evident in other visualisations produced by Nightingale’s contemporaries.

A simplistic but rather impactful visualisation of the water pumps in London associated with transmission of cholera paved the way for root cause identification (Snow 1854).

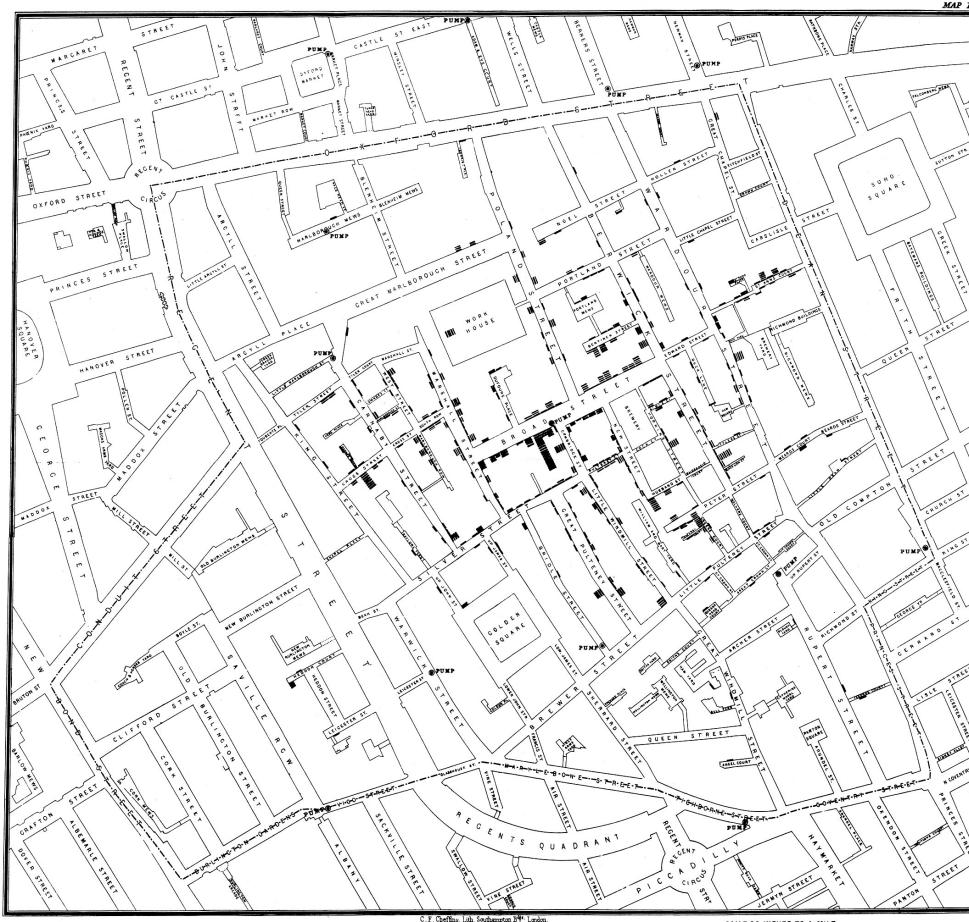
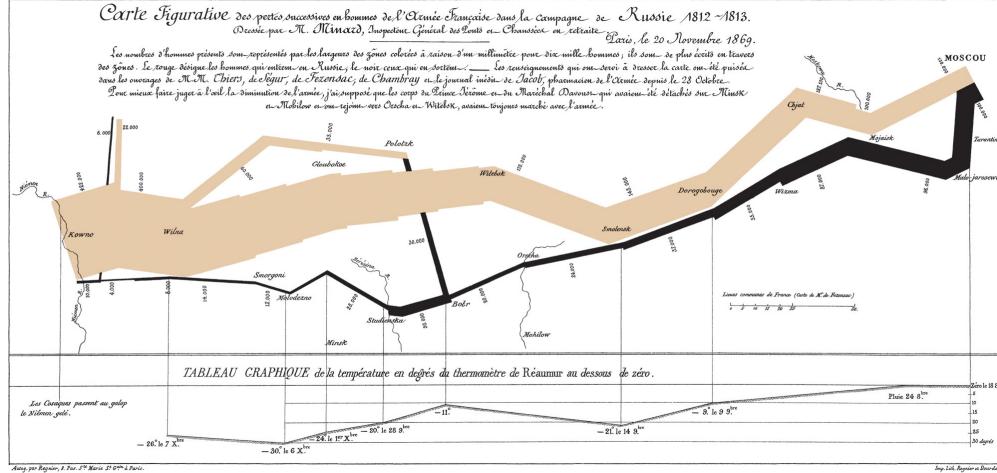


Figure 2: Map by John Snow showing clusters of cholera cases in the London epidemic of 1854.
Source: Wikimedia Commons.

An early complex visualisation was created by Minard in 1861, depicting [data from Napoleon's march on Moscow in 1812/13](#) and his subsequent retreat.

The map shows latitude and longitude of the army as it moved. The line shows the direction of movement, and the line width represents the size of the army (the surviving soldiers). Particular locations were marked by the date of the army presence, and the temperature is shown, too. Six variables were elegantly woven into a single display (Tufte 2001; Corbett 2001; Robinson 1967).

The Paris Exposition in 1900 featured W. E. B. Du Bois exhibiting graphs, charts, and maps of how Black Americans were living (Du Bois 1900; Battle-Baptiste and Rusert 2018).



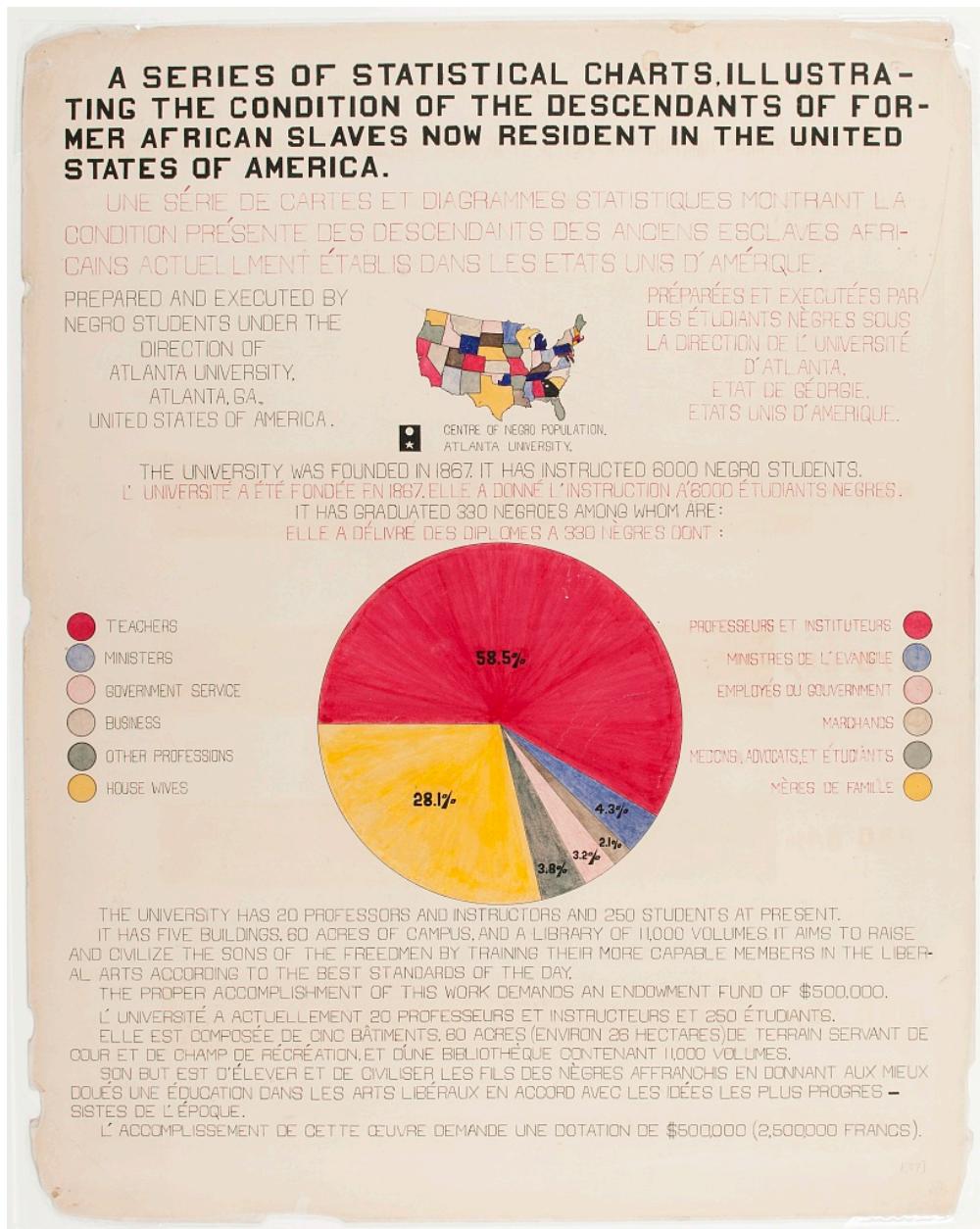


Figure 4: A series of statistical charts illustrating the condition of the descendants of former African slaves now in residence in the United States of America. Drawing, ca. 1900. //hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ppmsca.33899. Source: Library of Congress.

- developed (Sarkar 2008) since “trellis” carried a trademark (by Lucent and later MathSoft). With the advent of ggplot, the term faceting (with functions `facet_grid` and `facet_wrap`) replaced the “lattice” with its “panels”.
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