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Data Visualization

250 words

Map vs. Chart Preference

Darla Cameron makes a lot of excellent points in her talk “The End of Maps in 7 Charts.” Though, one of her points – data is not geographic – I would like to respectfully caveat. Data is not ALWAYS geographic, but sometimes it needs to be.

In the case of Dr. John Snow, who cleverly investigated a local cholera outbreak by plotting cases on a town map, it was ONLY in being able to visualize the incidents in relation to other municipal elements, (i.e. make the data geographic) that important deductions could be made and the source of the cholera be identified.

I don’t know that I’m convinced this is the case with my map, plotting mean ages at marriage around the world. But looking at the map I noticed a striking difference in two countries that shared a border. In Niger, child marriage is the norm, but in Libya, directly to its north, the average age a woman gets married 31—on par with Western Europe and North America.

When looking at incongruity despite geographic proximity, we can ask deeper questions, such as; what is it in the culture, political, economic or historical context that causes this disparity? I also looked at literacy rates of men and women and GDP per capita to shed more light on the vast disparities between these neighbors.

Very important, especially for the American public, is awareness of geography. Maps remind us where stuff is. Can you put your finger on Gabon? Burkina Faso? I can’t either, and in thinking MORE about my map, I’m realizing it might have been helpful to label the countries.

Looking at my bar chart, I would not have made the connection between Niger and Libya being neighboring countries and worth deeper investigation. With my map, I did make that connection.

And in sum, I would submit that the map is in fact the best way of visualizing these data.