

Design Critique - Iraq's bloody toll

By Vanya Arikutharam (PES1201800379)

The main graphic is what first catches your eye, along with the heading of the visualisation. Both of them paint a bloody picture in your mind, the main visualisation quite cleverly looking like dripping blood due to the reversed y axis and well chosen colour palette. The second thing you notice from the main graphic are the death toll numbers smartly placed at the centre of the graph in readable white font. Next, your eyes drift across the various events highlighted across the graph.

The highlighted events are well placed as most of the sudden peaks and troughs are explained, especially the sudden drop during late 2007 which could be attributed to Saddam Hussein's execution. However there's a seemingly random spike in early 2008 which is left unexplained. Upon closer inspection, it aligns with the end of the invasion timeline at the bottom of the graph which offers a possible explanation for the spike. However, adding another highlighted event at that point might've been a better choice as the reason for the end of the invasion is not mentioned anywhere in the visualisation, and could be added here.

Now coming to the right hand-side, there's a small piece of text written right above the smaller graphics, which summarises the narrative of the entire visualisation. It is readable, relevant and well-placed.

The first graphic below that shows the number of troops deployed by the US across the same timeline as the main graphic. Using a separate graphic instead of overlaying the histogram/line onto the main graphic even though their x axis ranges match, was a good choice as their y axis scales are very different. The single event highlighted is also relevant as it explains the rise in the graph following the event. However, another event could've been highlighted in order to explain the drop in the number of troops deployed post 2007.

The pi chart below the aforementioned graphic is a good choice and makes sense in the context shown. The number of Iraqi security forces is also mentioned which is useful for the viewer to know. However the 'To July 2010' written below it is a little confusing. It could've been phrased in more understandable way.

The map of Iraq at the bottom right is intuitive to understand. The colour scale used is conventional and hence easy to understand with a very little chance of confusion. The cities are also clearly seen along with their fatality count without any overlapping text. The sentence written under the graphic title is informative and helps the viewers understand why the numbers are high in certain areas.

The last graphic placed at the bottom shows the various ways civilians were killed. The choice of graphic is nice and all the circles are properly scaled which paints a clear picture in the viewers mind. However the two overlapping circles ('Executions' and 'Small arms gunfire'), lead to a bit of confusion. Why are they overlapping? Were some of the executions caused by small arms gunfire? If so, what percentage is that overlap? Hence, the circles should've either been separated or the reason for overlap should've been mentioned. An alternate graphic choice could've been a pi chart. However the person who made the visualisation probably didn't want repeat graphics.

Overall, it was a very elegantly designed visualisation. Personally, I liked the colour palette chosen as it really enhances the narrative. I'm also impressed by the use of the reversed y axis scale without confusing the viewer. All of the sub-graphics added to the story and weren't redundant. It is also trustworthy as the sources have been cited and all the data points make sense without any discrepancies between graphics. It would've been more enhanced with a few minor changes here and there for better understanding. All in all, it was a well-presented visualisation with a strong narrative that was clearly reflected in the design choices taken.