

THE
ENGINE
ROOM

Data-driven lies

The ethics of using data in advocacy

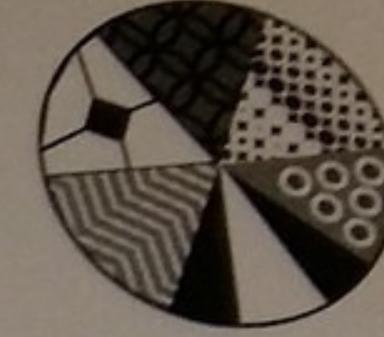
November 4th, 2016

Presented by Zara Rahman at Books in Browsers

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Referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union



Vote only once by putting a cross  in the box next to your choice

Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?

Remain a member of the European Union

Leave the European Union





Let's give our **NHS** the
£350 million
the EU takes every week



Vote Leave, take control



Credit: Jack Taylor/Getty



Credit: Metro UK

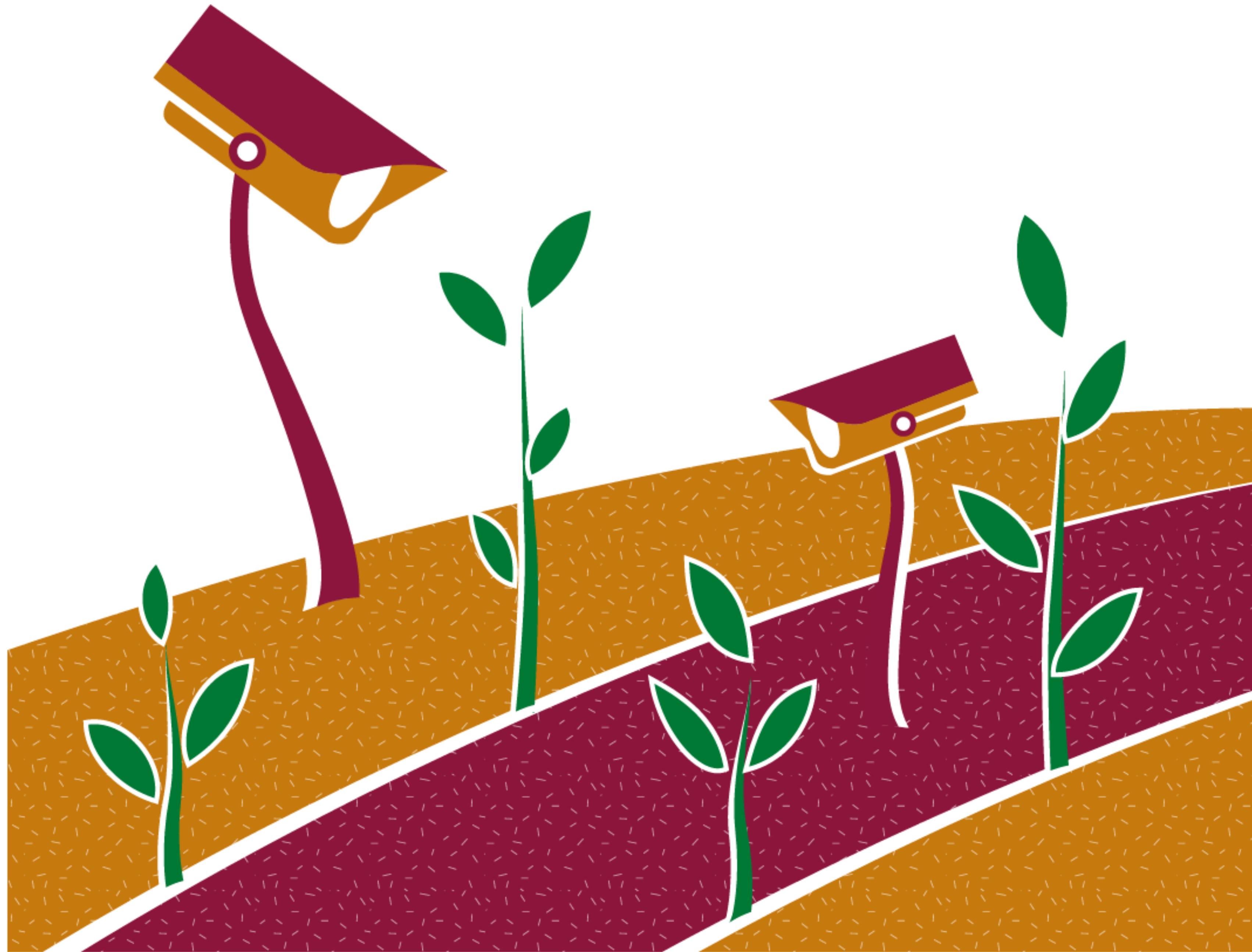
Telling stories
(for good causes)

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Responsible Data

<https://theengineroom.org>

<https://responsibledata.io>



Data-driven advocacy and storytelling



Example #1: sexual violence in Liberia



UN calls on country where up to three quarters of women have been raped to 'end impunity' for sex attackers

- The Independent, 15 October 2016

"According to the World Health Organization, "between 61.4 and 77.4 per cent of women and girls in Liberia were raped during the war."

- UN OHCHR, October 2016

"...in a disturbing survey of six counties by the World Health Organisation, almost 75 percent of the female respondents claimed to have been raped."

- IPS News Agency, September 2009



**Were 75 percent of Liberian women and girls raped?
No. So why is the U.N. repeating that misleading
'statistic'?**

Source: Washington Post, October 26

by Dara Kay Cohen and Amelia Hoover Green

Example #2: deaths in Syria

The Syrian Center for Policy Research says that 11.5% of Syria's population has been killed or injured. The five-year-old war in Syria has claimed **470,000** lives, according to new research that almost doubles previous estimates about the human cost of the conflict. Feb 11, 2016



[The Death Toll From Syria's War Is Actually 470,000, New Research ...](http://time.com/4216896/death-toll-syria-war-470000/)
time.com/4216896/death-toll-syria-war-470000/ Time ▾

Google: "how many people have died in Syria?"

Google Search

Data sources

- March 15 Group
- Syrian government
- Syrian Center for Statistics and Research
- Syrian Network for Human Rights
- Syrian Observatory for Human Rights
- Syrian Revolution General Council
- Syria Shuhada Website
- Violations Documentation Centre
- Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies

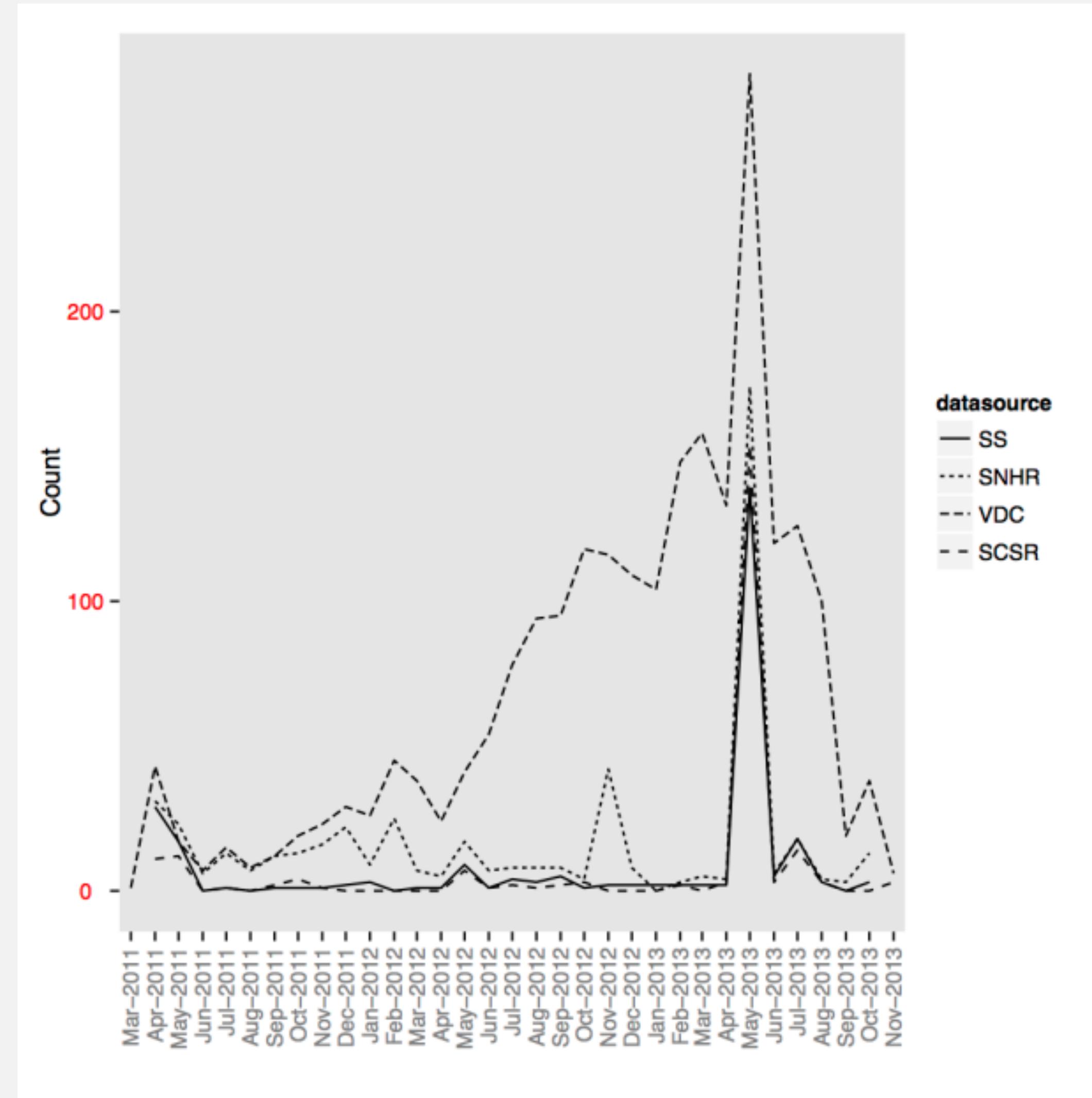


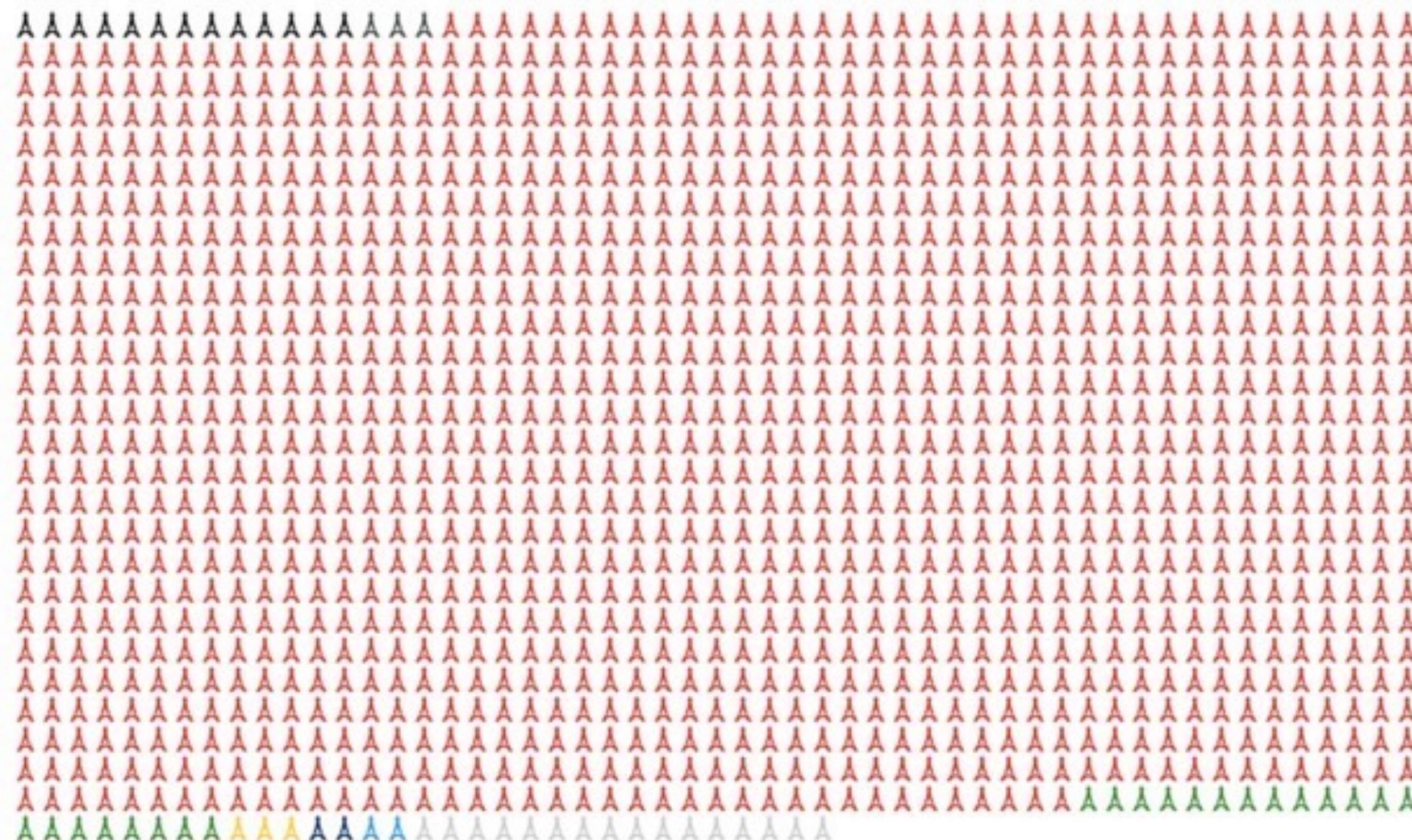
Image taken from '[Searching for Trends: Analyzing Patterns in Conflict Violence Data](#)'
post by Megan Price and Anita Gohdes, copied here with permission

Paris

▲ = 129 civilians killed.



Syria

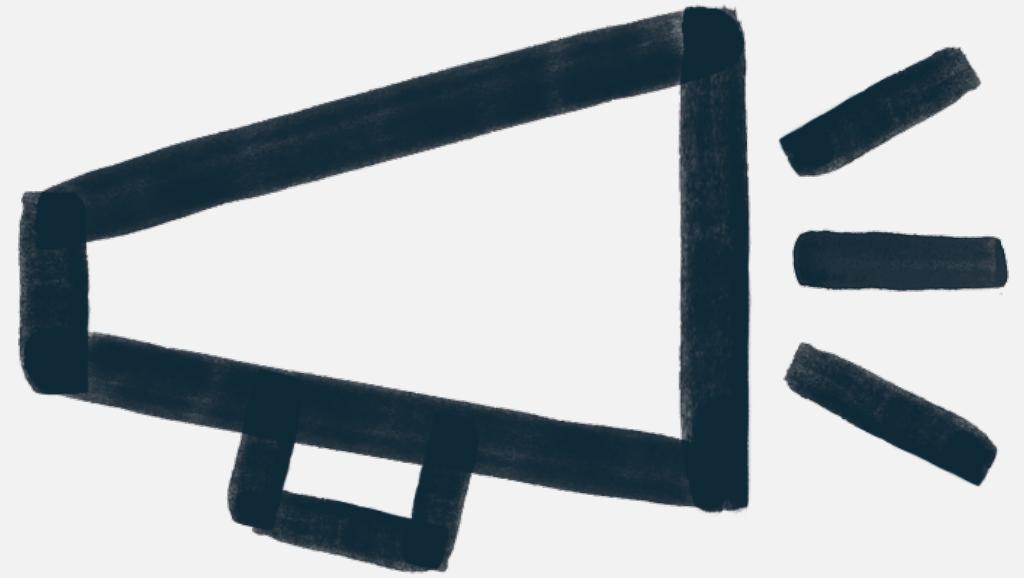


Civilians killed by:

▲ = Isis (1,712) ▲ = Al Qaeda / Nusra (347) ▲ = Assad forces & allies (80,879) ▲ = Rebels (2,669) ▲ = Kurdish forces (379) ▲ = US-led coalition (251) ▲ = Russian forces (263) ▲ = Unknown (2,002)

Source: Syria Network for Human Rights. Civilians killed between 15 March 2011 and 31 October 2015

Raising awareness (and money)



Getting people's attention



does it matter if we're right?



AladdinGifs



SLAUGHTER IS HAPPENING IN DARFUR. YOU CAN HELP END IT. In 2003, Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir moved to crush opposition by unleashing vicious armed militias to slaughter entire villages of his own citizens. After three years, 400,000 innocent men, women and children have been killed.

with quantified data, being
discredited can be very easy

"Facts and reliable information are essential for the functioning of democracy – and the digital era has made that even more obvious."

Kath Viner <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/jul/12/how-technology-disrupted-the-truth>

credibility matters
(especially in this field)

these stories are messy

desensitisation

= a race to the bottom

:-)

conclusion

why data???

What role is data playing in your story?

- Getting people's attention
- Calling them to action
- Raising awareness of a certain topic
- **Acting as the crux of your campaign**

**responsibly using data takes time
(and skills)**

not everything can be quantified

it's not about the data or
technology,
it's the people (and the stories)

Conclusion

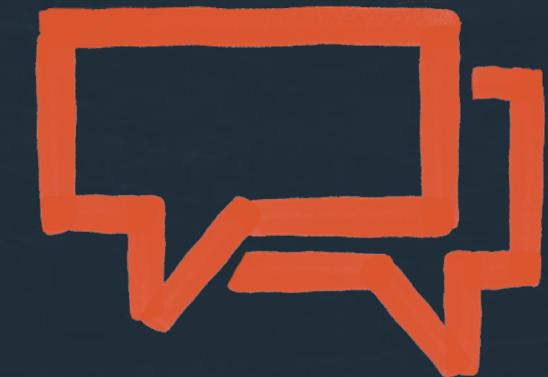
- Not everything can be quantified
- Responsibly using statistics takes time and skills
- Institutional credibility matters in the long term
- Think critically about what you're hearing (and saying)
- Data and tech < good storytelling

Thank you for listening!

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@zararah | @engnroom

Further reading



Uncertainty in data

- Responsible Data Reflection Story: recognising uncertainty in statistics
- Feminist data visualisation - blog post by Catherine D'Ignazio
- Feminist data visualisation - paper by Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein
- Responsible Data Visualisation - collection of links
- Human Rights Data Analysis Group (HRDAG) <http://hrdag.org/>

Use and misuse of numbers

- Numbers are only human, by Brian Root
- The Human Cost of the Syrian Civil War, by Anthony Cordesman
- "If I look at the mass I will never act" - Psychic numbing and genocide
- Absurdity and the Sensible decision, by Nina Holm Vohnsen
- Dueling incentives: Sexual violence in Liberia and the politics of human rights advocacy, by Dara Kay Cohen and Amelia Hoover Green

Use and misuse of numbers

- Deaths in Darfur: Keeping ourselves honest
- Facts and Darfur, Oct 2007
- UN decides to stop updating Syria death toll - AP, Jan 2014