

**Martin Engelbertsen & Helen Kennedy (Eds.):
Data Visualization in Society.
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We live in the age of data, and the visual clues are everywhere to be seen. From static charts to interactive dashboards, and from maps and timelines to complex networks and electronic imaging technology, data visualization is not only omnipresent, but is a rapidly growing, billion-dollar industry. It is increasingly hard to think of a practice where new forms of data and data analysis are not challenging established ways of making sense and taking decisions. Journalism, civic action, business intelligence, social research – the list goes on, and visualization is a crucial central mediating technology that helps make it all possible. It is therefore not only timely, but extremely necessary to ask, as Martin Engelbertsen and Helen Kennedy do, what data visualization means in and does to society?

Over the course of 26 engagingly written chapters, Engelbertsen, Kennedy, and their 42 contributing authors cover an impressive thematic breadth spanning from discussions of how we define data visualization, over semiotics, data literacy, and narration, to explorations of what it means to live and work with data, how inequalities are embedded in different styles of visualization, and how stakeholders can be engaged in and by visual data work. Each chapter is relatively short (approximately 15 pages) and many of them would work well as reading material for master's-level courses with a strong media studies and/or STS component.

If there is a communal tone to the chapters, it is of an unmistakably critical sort. This is not another coffee table ode to information design in the style of David McCandless or Manuel Lima, nor is it an atlas project charting some aspect of social reality and giving it

visual form, such as in Katy Boerner's work. Read together, the book provides a comprehensive sociological analysis and critique of data visualization, and as such, it stands on the shoulders of works like Annamaria Carusi, Aud Sissel Hoel, Timothy Webmoor, and Steve Woolgar's *Visualization in the Age of Computerization* (2014) or Karin van Es and Mirko Tobias Schäfer's *The Datafied Society* (2017) – although, strangely, those collections are not explicitly recognized by the editors.

There is less systematic engagement with the tools and methods of data visualization – the technical choices facing the data designer, how different types of data enable different types of visualization, or how these types have different affordances in different scenarios of use – and that is entirely in line with what you would expect from a book that does not pretend to have tutorial ambitions. Yet – and this speaks to the great credit of the editors – many of the authors clearly have in-depth experience with the engine rooms of data visualization and provide first-hand accounts of how technical, methodological, ethical, and sociopolitical questions become practically embedded in each other. This is not an “easy” critique at a distance, but engaged scholarship at its finest. As a reader, you are in no doubt that the authors actually care for data visualization, in many instances because they practice it themselves, and that they actively seek to do it differently. When Engelbertsen and Kennedy ask what data visualization means in specific sociocultural contexts, the answers of their contributing authors are often more speculative and interventionist than descriptive. They engage, through demonstration and experiment, with what visualization could and should do in those contexts. The book, then, is an inspirational catalogue of proposals for how data visualization could be made to matter in new and sociologically informed ways.

It is perhaps a weakness that relatively little energy is spent on framing the computational aspects of the current data moment as consequential to data visualization in society. One almost gets the impression that the impetus for the book is simply the fact that there is infinitely more data visualization around and not so much that the character of these visualizations is changing. Yes, visualizations run the risk of (appearing to be) performing Donna Haraway's (1988) “god trick”, as the editors point out, but that is arguably no different now than it was a hundred years ago. What has changed, for example, is the proclaimed ability of machine learning to glean “insights” from large enough volumes of data without the need for theory or hypotheses (Anderson, 2008) – the naïve belief that data can “speak for itself”. This raises questions about the complicity of data visualization in perpetuating Big Data myths. Conversely, one could argue that the increasing ability of dashboards to make data navigable without aggregating or otherwise flattening it turns data visualization from a confirmatory and explanatory tool to more of a practice that enables exploratory forms of analysis and allows stakeholders to critically engage with findings. This, in turn, puts focus on processes of datafication and the urgency of letting publics see, quite literally, and tinker with the way their matters of concern are represented as data. Such questions are particular to the current data moment and are

largely covered and discussed throughout the chapters of the book. It would have been a strength if they were front-staged even more clearly as part of the framing that makes the book so relevant and timely.

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