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Data Design

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Every day, we see countless visual displays of information in reports, books, magazines, and slideshows, and on TV and the Internet. We rely on charts, maps, diagrams and the like to help us make decisions and get things done. Given the relative ease with which organizations and individuals can now access huge amounts of raw data, representing this “Big Data” visually has become a popular subject matter in design. However, the current trend in infographics and data visualization seems to be to make data “stunning” rather than informative. So a book about making data visualization useful—rather than merely beautiful—is very welcome.

As the author—an expert on information design—succinctly states, “This book is not about data decoration.” Data Design clearly describes the basic concepts, principles, and practices required to create visual displays that make data not only captivating—but rather than merely beautiful—is very welcome.

The first part of the book provides a brief overview of the theory behind good data visualization. Chapter 1, called “Field of Study,” outlines the fundamentals of data design. The next chapter, “Basics,” introduces principles of perception and psychology applicable to visual display design. The second part is a practical reference guide divided into three chapters—“Quantities,” “Locations,” and “Connections.” Each of the formats addresses a particular question, such as “How do items compare?” or “How do we get from station A to B?” or “When did what happen?” and is accompanied by a description of applicable concepts, a set of instructions, and illustrative examples.

On one hand, the book is very practical—no specialist tools are required. By simply following the instructions and examples, anyone can start designing better data displays immediately. On the other hand, Data Design is not a book of purely instrumental design methods—although the guidelines are presented clearly and unambiguously, the author appeals for designers to use critical skills and common sense. In fact, while the design of the book itself exemplifies the principles of data design, it also breaks the rules when appropriate.

Data Design is a slim 176 pages—but with 200 displays, it comes across as equally parsimonious and comprehensive. And while the language used is economical, there remains a smattering of Danish sarcasm to add some humour to the text.

Author Per Mollerup is Professor of Communication Design at Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia. He was previously owner and principal of Designlab in Copenhagen, a design consultancy specializing in wayshowing and branding. He has authored several books on a variety of design topics, including space-saving objects and trademarks. This work is the latest in a string of publications outlining information design principles and offering practical guidance for designers; other recent works have dealt with slide presentations and wayshowing.

If you are seeking discussion about the history of information design or the psychology of visual perception, you may not find this book useful. And if complex, decorative displays are what inspire you, then this book is certainly not going to satisfy. Data Design is a book that provides instruction on data visualization written by an expert on information design. It is unapologetically concerned with accuracy, simplicity, and clarity. Anyone who seeks to represent data intelligibly and effectively—graphic designers, human-machine communication designers, interaction designers, researchers, writers, editors—will benefit the most from the basic principles and guidance provided within its pages.