Data Visualisation in Davos: it's beautiful but what's it for?

blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2011/01/26/data-visualisation-in-davos-its-beautiful-but-whats-it-for/

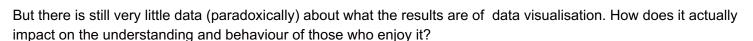The combination of a new flood of open data combined with cheap, clever, open source tools means that we can visualise information in beautiful and compelling ways that was not possible before. But what's it for and where is it going?

[Adam Blyof Seed Media](#) gave a great presentation at a session on designing a new reality at the World Economic Forum at Davos and in the workshop that followed some really interesting attempts were made to answer those questions.

Yes, it is great that governments, corporations, NGOs and others are now putting loads of facts and figures out there online. It is wonderful that we have the programmes to make that rather boring factual stuff into pretty pictures, icons, maps, graphs and images. But we are still just starting to find out how to filter and shape that data to give the process value.

We can see that it seems to work for communicating discovery amongst experts. Different disciplines like scientists and economists speak different languages. Data visualisation helps them to find a common vocabulary.

It also can work for the public who we want to communicate with about their world and the tidal wave of data that threatens to swamp their lives.

But there is still very little data (paradoxically) about what the results are of data visualisation. How does it actually impact on the understanding and behaviour of those who enjoy it?

And what is good or bad about the results of data visualisation? Perhaps it separates out into rational understanding (I now get the figures) and emotional understanding (I now care about the figures and want to do something).

Does data visualisation have to achieve anything or is its value in simply making something manifest? It might be better if you don't design it for a specific result, but rather let that evolve through interaction with users.

Certainly DV can be a tool for commerce or democracy. But at the moment it tends to lag. It uses data that is historic – if only by days. Wouldn't it be more interesting if it could be more immediate, for example, by connecting it to social media?

That's already happening, of course, but again we are only just beginning to understand how it might work and what effect it might have.

Naturally, with designers there is always a tension between creating something beautiful and something useful. But it is important to remember that unless DV attracts our attention and gives us some kind of aesthetic pleasure then it will never achieve the utilitarian, either.

DV is also heading into the future. It has predictive potential in a way that is more than just a reiteration of existing data. It can use sound as well as visuals. It can be many things, but we need to know more about what it changes. 'More research needed', as we like to say here in research organisations.