Chapter 4

Infographics in Humanities:
Communication of Information or Information Noise? Polish Case

Zbigniew Osiński
Maria Curie Skłodowska University, Poland

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the chapter is to join in the discussion of digital humanists on whether data and information visualizations can be an efficient way of communicating information and knowledge about the specificity of the humanities. The basis is to examine the problem of whether a visual communication containing far more graphical elements than text can be something more to the abovementioned group of recipients than a complement to the principal text (as is the case with school handbooks). Can it be a dominant form of communication? In order to obtain research data, a series of didactic tests were administered to a handpicked group of several dozen students. They were students with predominantly humanistic competencies but for whom modern technology poses no barriers in the cognitive process. The test results showed the usefulness of infographics as a form of organization and presentation but only of detailed data and information. The visualization of information did not turn out to be a good foundation for making generalizations and conclusions.

INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-twentieth century there have been observable changes in the scientific and media communications, including those based on humanistic problems. Presentations of infographics, photos and films began to compete with the linear text. These tendencies intensified as the digital media developed, including the Internet, and in particular with the rise of the digital humanities, which undertook to study human digital products. The purpose of the study is to join in the discussion of digital humanists on whether the visualizations of data and information (the use of diverse graphical forms and techniques for presenting content) can be an efficient way of communicating information and knowledge about the specificity of the humanities. For the purpose of the research project, the author applies the last concept not only to refer to the knowledge about history and culture but also knowledge about education and...
all other manifestations of human intellectual activity. In principle, the point is to stress that the studies are not concerned with the visualization of the functioning of devices, living organisms, physical and chemical processes, geological or climatic phenomena, etc. They are concerned with more or less abstract phenomena and processes. Efficacy will be examined, having in mind the receiver who is definitely less prepared for the visual form of communication than information visualization experts, i.e. the graduate of the Polish education system. The author is interested in the efficacy of visualization in the communication from the world of scientists and experts to the world of average users of the material with information and knowledge. To the world of persons to whom modern technologies are no obstacle in the cognitive process and who use elements of communication visualization, e.g. by using emoticons or creating and spreading graphical memes in social media. The article will be based on the investigation of the problem whether a visual communication containing far more graphical elements than a text can be something more to the recipient group (as is the case with school handbooks)? Can it be the dominant form of communication when we are speaking of abstract phenomena and processes, which are reflected not so much in the material reality as in the human mind? Are average graduates of the Polish education system able to understand the message contained in visualizations and find necessary information? Can such communication be useful in solving problems? This will be the way of verifying the thesis promoted by digital humanists, which says that in the days of the Internet, the writing and linear narrative can be superseded in describing the world for the visual forms of communication. It is also necessary to verify fears that visualizations only increase information noise or surplus information and their forms and sources, which make it difficult to distinguish true and essential information.

BACKGROUND

Graphical forms of the presentation of data and information (maps, charts, graphs, diagrams, drawings, photographs, etc.) have long been found in different forms of communicating humanistic knowledge. They usually accompany the primary text as the illustration of the content. The development of information technologies based on the capabilities of hardware and software as well as the Internet cause graphics to become an important form of information transmission in social and scientific communication. The emergence of the digital humanities definitely increased and even qualitatively changed the role and significance of the graphical forms of presentation of data, information, and knowledge. Robert Rosenstone (2008) and Hayden White (2008) proposed a thesis from which it follows that film can be a medium of knowledge equivalent to the written text. Using the example of the history of mankind they demonstrated that storytelling through picture and film is not encumbered with greater limitations and defects than storytelling through the printed text. We should also mention the thesis by David Staley (2003), who suggested that in the days of the dominance of visual content (the media, Internet), students should be taught to read and analyze multimedia and graphical media communications. I recognized these forms of communication as equivalent to the printed text but as having their separate grammar and genre characteristics. In Staley’s conception the nontextual forms of communication are not a simple decoration or illustration to the text but a separate message. Polish humanist Andrzej Radomski (2016) advances the thesis that visualization entered the humanities not only as the way of illustrating the content but also as a research method. He argues that the visual communication of content begins to supersede the written word, and that the elites more often think in terms of figures and pictures rather than language. The scale of data and information production begins to impose visualization upon everyone, including