

A Critique of Beautiful News: Positive Trends, Uplifting Stats, Creative Solutions

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Abstract

This book review is a critical evaluation of the David McCandless' book titled, Beautiful News: Positive Trends, Uplifting Stats, Creative Solutions. In this critique we summarize the essence of the written work and connect the work to the field of agricultural communications and applied practices. We offer some insights into contradictions we viewed from the perspective and expectations of data visualization strategies for communicating information. Finally, we recommend the book for those seeking inspiration for data visualization design and those needing a push to think outside the traditional strategies used in the field.

Keywords

data visualization, data storytelling; book review

Book Essence

Beautiful News: Positive Trends, Uplifting Stats, Creative Solutions, written by David McCandless, a London-based writer, data journalist, and author of three best-selling infographic books, takes you on a visual journey through data. McCandless adds a twist to the original realm of charts and graphics, presenting this publication as a compilation of trendy, infographic primers and visual explanations that focus on good news (e.g. news and data often overlooked or uncelebrated by traditional news and media outlets). McCandless (2021) describes the iterations within this book as “the slow and steady symphony of progress” (p. 8). This 256-page sequel to *The Visual Miscellaneum* embodies the essence of optimism, cheerfulness, and enthusiasm, demonstrating a thorough understanding and application of data storytelling and curated insights.

In a world where conflict, tragedy, and distressing content dominate news and media coverage, this book provides a refreshing change. Through unique visuals, McCandless illuminates underrated, positive developments associated with health, cleaner energy, money, nature, human rights, and cool technology. The author’s ability to simplify complex data into recognizable patterns and insights and capture the eye’s attention through aesthetically pleasing visual elements makes for an easy read.

Connection & Relevance

Dykes (2019), a well-regarded author in data visualization, discusses how stories are a foundational element of learning and underscores the human habit of storytelling, a practice that was amplified by visual. McCandless’s book is a continuation of our innate storytelling habit using visuals. Rather than providing raw data, McCandless emphasizes the storytelling power of data with his ability to simplify complex data into beautifully designed articulations. Throughout his work, McCandless demonstrates the recommended visual science communication efforts deemed effective by Franconeri et al. (2021).

Design and aesthetic appeal are where McCandless’s talents shine and reflect the publication’s title and content. Each data visualization incorporates variations of engaging, bright, bold colors and relevant icons or shapes when applicable. McCandless continually challenges the status quo of information sharing. He adds a clever and unique twist to the table of contents by organizing it by theme or topic of data visualization in bubbles. Larger themes or categories are depicted by larger bubbles, like the composition of bubble charts. The acknowledgements include plain text attributing data sources and an acknowledgement Venn diagram with characters and names of individuals who inspired McCandless in areas of research, coding, design, and logistics. Aside from the bubble chart style table of contents and acknowledgement section, the book does not have much structure. There are no sections or chapters; one data visualization is followed by another from cover to cover.

McCandless demonstrates strong skill in choosing the most effective visuals for different data sets. He uses a waffle chart to display the elimination of malaria worldwide and what countries are certified malaria-free, a triangular heat map unveiling the potential of wind power, a line graph showcasing the average life expectancy in each country and how it has increased, and much more (McCandless, 2021). You’ll find compelling illustrations of bubble charts, word clouds, bar charts, waffle charts, timelines, heat maps, radial diagrams, tree maps, scatter plots, waterfall charts, and simple text iterations.

Patterns, shifts, and trends in data we may normally overlook in raw data are brought to light with data visualizations (Dykes, 2019). McCandless uses various preattentive attributes such as color, shade/hue, size, intensity, and shape to lead the eye to key resemblances, disparities, and trends, aligning with best practices stated by Dykes (2019) and Knafllic (2015).

In applied communications, McCandless's showcases what is possible when you think outside the box with data and visualizations. His approach to highly debated topics through artistic measures allows for deeper considerations of data while maintaining approachability.

Contradictions

While McCandless does address difficult topics like suicide and poverty, his focus on a data-backed, positive outlook is clear. This outlook does have the potential to oversimplify complex problems, like renewable energy or food technologies.

When it comes to choosing colors, a common industry practice suggests avoiding color palettes such as red and green, as they are challenging for individuals with color blindness to distinguish (Dykes, 2019). There are a few data visualizations within McCandless' book that include various shades of red and green; however, due to the type of visualization, such as a waffle chart or bubble chart, the audience can still distinguish data as percentages are included.

It would have been interesting to see the book organized in a way like a storytelling arc where McCandless introduces data visualization examples from a beginner, to intermediate, to advanced level. McCandless's lack of a guiding narrative might limit the applicability of his work to those seeking an instructional guide to data visualization. No other contradictions were found between the content of the book and standard data visualization practices.

Recommendations

The book provides various iterations of data visualizations that challenge the reader's understanding, meet the needs of various levels of data literacy, and can serve as an inspiration or brainstorming tool for data visualization creation. This book may not be the best source to instruct or educate those interested in data storytelling or visualizations, especially at an undergraduate level. Instead, it can serve as a resource to spark creative thinking.

This is not a book intended for all audiences at a collegiate level. It seems the ideal target audience aligns with doctoral students disseminating research outcomes and professionals with a career involving data analytics or professionals within an applied communication field. The book offers inspiration that can be transferred to the agricultural industry to develop data visualizations displaying changes in consumer preferences, commodity yields, indicators of sustainability practices, food traceability, and the route from farm to table.

This book is not a step-by-step guide on best data visualization practices and does not include text explaining how to tell a visual story. Instead, the book resembles a picture book for data visualists and storytellers. The only plain text included in the book lies within the introduction. Therefore, we recommend this book be coupled with other data storytelling texts to amplify understanding and skill application.

References

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