Book Review: The Infographic: A History of Data Graphics in News and Communications by Murray Dick

*In **The Infographic: A History of Data Graphics in News and Communications**, **Murray Dick** offers a new cultural history of the infographic, tracing its emergence and development in Britain from the eighteenth century. The book succeeds in offering an account of an evolving media form, showing the infographic to be a contradictory tool, one developed to persuade select upper-class audiences that slowly became a form of mass communication, writes **Sam di Bella**.*

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***The Infographic: A History of Data Graphics in News and Communications**. Murray Dick. MIT Press. 2020.*

All this data we're unearthing in each and every human or inhuman interaction has to make sense to someone. And, for years, practitioners of visual journalism and data visualisation have offered their services to newsrooms and designers to try to make that 'someone' into 'anyone' (or close to). There are many ways infographics can work, from the austere scientific design of [Edward Tufte](#) to the kaleidoscopic experiments of the [Feltron Annual Reports](#). In his new monograph *The Infographic: A History of Data Graphics in News and Communications*, Murray Dick argues that each of these outlooks draws on corresponding styles of recounting the infographic's history.

Dick reserves his harshest criticism for what he terms the 'mathematical-statistical' view of the infographic, which limits history to a personal view of the inventors of graphical forms. For Dick, these admiring histories focus only on the resulting visual designs and the person who made them, and in doing so, fall into the 'historian's pathetic fallacy, the abstraction of events from their contexts, and the construction of a narrative in primary reference to today'. They mainly concern themselves with innovations of design and excellence of practice, without taking into account the culture that those designs occurred in. (I've noted a similar deficiency in my own search for good histories of cryptography; this problem seems a common theme for histories of practical methods of communication.) He has a similar criticism for psychological or cognitive histories of infographics — they tend to universalise the reasons for a graphic's appeal in suggesting that it's innate to some element of human physiology.

Both styles of history also tend to favour a 'transmission' model of communication that views media as a discrete message sent from a single producer to a recipient. Dick prefers to look at infographics through James Carey's theory of communication as ritual, a continued message sent between varying communicators and recipients that depends upon and changes shared assumptions. Dick sets out to fill in the gaps of previous infographic histories with a cultural history, one that accounts for the audience of the infographic — how this communicative tool was disseminated and received, and to what effect.
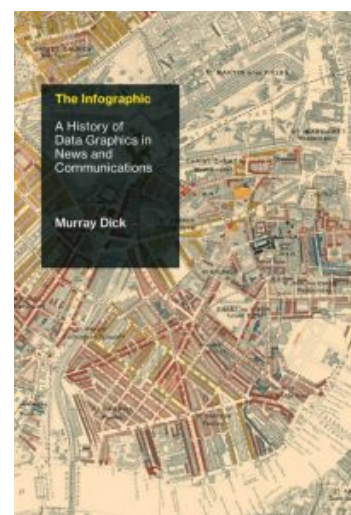
Dick breaks his British history of infographics down into four periods, and he is particularly interested in the cultural resistances that prevented the infographic from spreading in each era. Using archival research, interviews with visualisation practitioners and semiotic visual discourse analysis, Dick places visualisations in British periodicals at the centre of his history. Dick grounds his commentary on specific infographics in contemporary best-practice principles for visual journalists and George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's theory of conceptual metaphors. This last choice is slightly odd, since Lakoff and Johnson are cognitive linguists: they see a 'conceptual metaphor' as a figure of speech that somehow reflects our relation to our personal bodily sensations and sensory perception. Dick sets his scope narrowly and keeps to it: possible comparisons to visual developments in different countries or earlier precursors are mostly kept cursory or not mentioned.
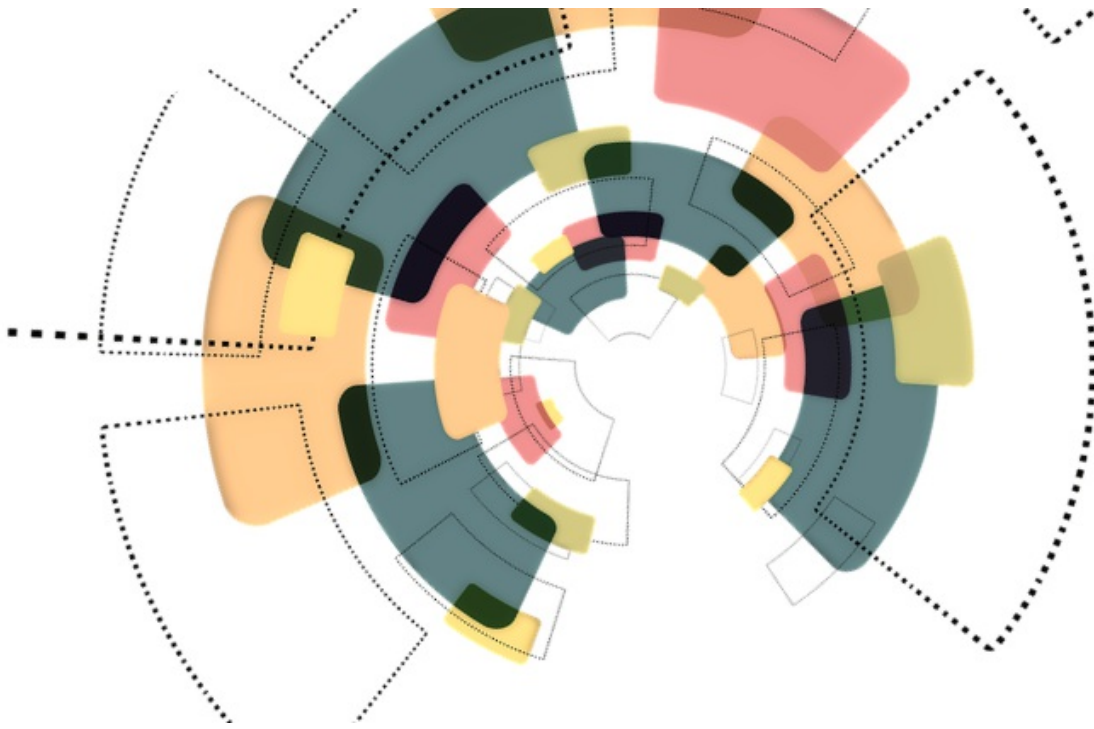
The first British infographic era begins with Joseph Priestley in the eighteenth century. Priestley was a Protestant dissenter and educator interested in bringing the whole span of history within his students' reach. He created two diagrams, *A New Chart of History* and *A Chart of Biography*, that were popular as teaching aids for decades. Their large size (*A Chart of Biography* was three feet by two feet) meant they were not disseminated in newsprint or even intended for private reading: they were a tool for discussion. Describing Priestley's condensation of human history in *A Chart of Biography*, Dick writes, 'It is fun (trivial), but serious (deterministic)' (41). William Playfair, the Scottish pragmatist and political economist, adopted similar visualisation methods and combined them with data from recent advances in national statistics to make cogent arguments about the British national economy. Notably, his work was intended more to persuade, rather than inform.

At the time, a print culture for newspapers was still only just beginning — newspapers had developed from London coffee house culture, where they were often read aloud or shared among many readers. The term 'journalist' hadn't really been established. And the high price of newspapers, due to the Stamp Act of 1712, and the low rate of general literacy meant news publications mostly reached middle- or upper-class readers, not a large percentage of the population. Plus, the expensive process of engraving, prior to the invention of lithography, made producing infographics a laborious process. Journals and books were the main place for Playfair's publication of infographics, and while Priestley wrote often, his graphic work remained more tied to his pedagogy than his published radical beliefs on religious tolerance.

A wave of social 'improvers' as well as the development of survey and census techniques in the nineteenth century mark Dick's second age of the infographic. Still, infographics were not prominent in newspapers. John Snow's mapping of a cholera epidemic, Joseph Fletcher's statistical reports and [Florence Nightingale's visualisations of military health](#) were intended for the perusal of policymakers, not the public. It's only during the third and fourth age of infographics, from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, that the newspaper became the main venue for the infographic. As newspapers professionalised and adopted the sensationalist New Journalism style, they slowly developed specialised staff, including visual journalists who were skilled at both design and reporting.

British journalist training, however, still treated text as the journalist's primary domain, which meant that the supply of visual journalists, and the recognition they received, remained limited. While Dick agrees that technological constraints prevented infographics from spreading, he believes the state of the infographic is a reflection of the hierarchical UK education system. Early on, during Playfair and Priestley's time, classics was prized above other educational areas, which slowed the spread of general statistical knowledge. Later on, the 'whip of the word' kept its primary place in British education.

Dick argues that, like maps, infographics employ a kind of 'naive empiricism', whereby they seem to simply say what they mean, while hiding the artifice of their construction. Still, they require literacy, basic statistical knowledge and a familiarity with the form of the infographic before they can be useful to an audience. The infographic only recently became the mass, commodified form that it is today: it was not always assumed that the average reader would be able to parse an infographic. Along those lines, Dick opposes 'culture industry' theorists like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who saw forms like news infographics as '[dominating] complexity through linearity' or as manipulative of mass audiences.

Instead, Dick sees infographics as a democratic tool for making the few — governments and corporations — accountable to the many:

> Visually alluring data visualizations have a crucial role to play in the formation of our modern news and media, regardless of their tendency to reduce numerical fidelity or accuracy (or indeed, as they may challenge standards in taste and decency). An exclusive focus on what audiences understand in data, information, and facts represents a limited means of determining excellence in the field. (187)

He sees infographics as persuasive, but not propagandistic, because of the interpretive skill they require from a reader.

It is through that same argument that Dick's riposte to Tufte becomes clear. He argues that while infographics should strive for accuracy and clarity, many of the things that Tufte would qualify as 'chartjunk' (e.g. pie charts, line graphs with truncated axes and decorative elements) still have a place in the newsroom. Journalists are bound by the expectations and knowledge of their readers, and trying to speak to someone in a (visual) language that they don't understand, like rich, multivariate correlation plots, would be folly. It is this context and comparison of competing contemporary views of infographics that I found most useful in Dick's book.

I did occasionally feel like Dick drew the borders of his history *too* narrowly. For example, he describes the influence of Otto and Marie Neurath's Isotype pictogram language on twentieth-century newspapers, but the work of nineteenth-century French statistician Adolphe Quetelet gets only a paragraph or two, even though Dick repeatedly acknowledges the debt early British infographic makers owed to his methods. Some cultural concepts, like the Enlightenment idea of cognition as 'associationist', would also have benefitted from additional context.

In its goal, however, as a cultural history to use available readership and circulation data to describe an evolving media form, *The Infographic* succeeds. In the context of British print cultures, Tufte's '[Six Principles of Graphical Integrity](#)' are a list of maxims for a specific audience (scientific communication), rather than universal truths. Dick shows the infographic to be a contradictory tool, one developed to persuade select upper-class audiences that slowly became a form of mass communication. It's a way of speaking through images, with all the complexity that both mediums entail.

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