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BONUS HANDOUT: Charting tips/advice to make your life easier than mine

I spend too much time geeking out about charts. And if anyone gets that, it's friends of the ONA conference. Right? Of course!

Maybe these tips will be useful to someone. They both incorporate, and push beyond, what we talked about in the "Once Upon A Datum" session at ONA 2011 in Boston.

1. Google Image Charts are a really smart thing to learn. They'll generate a complicated looking URL that links to an image, with the options/data you select. Then, you can use it anywhere an image works. You know it'll be compatible everywhere, it's super-easy to resize and works with some fancy JavaScript charts just don't. My favorite example of this would be using these charts inside DocumentCloud annotations; we could literally show the numerical data that supports/contradicts the textual data of the documents.
2. There's a lot of junky chart libraries out there. Don't get too excited, but don't dismiss them all. Some of these are excellent at making one specific type of chart easy, and if that's the chart you're after, it might work for your purpose. But just like you don't want to have a potato peeler and a carrot peeler in your kitchen, you're better off with a more generic peeler (charting library). Invest more time to learn how it works, and you'll get better payoff.
3. Make sure to check your interactive charts in all the browsers/mobile platforms you want them to work on. I've been burned too many times by a boss/news consumer telling me it doesn't work in IE7.
4. Think about whether you're using the right type of chart. For the example I showed today, sure, you could use two pies for the different years. But it's easier for people's eyes to understand rectangles than circle segments, which are more irregularly shaped.
5. Most charting libraries have very thorough documentation. It's worth slogging through. When that fails, that's when you call out to your fellow news nerds on Twitter. (I'm @michelleminkoff, perhaps obviously.)
6. Consider interactive charts as a means for exploring your reporting. Then, as you finish the story, ready that chart for presentation to a more general group of news consumers.

7. Don't forget to add a legend, so we know what we're looking at without hovering! If you use Google Chart Tools, it's as easy as specifying " legend: 'right', " (or 'top', 'bottom', 'left' or 'none' are equally valid, choose where you want it to appear in relation to the graph, and none if you don't want a legend.)

8. When choosing colors for graphs or maps, if your news org does not have a color palette, you can get good ideas from <http://colorbrewer2.org/>.

9. Think about allowing people to select data that's most relevant to them, and drill down. This could be a drop-down menu, or the ability to select/get more info about certain data points. Doing this data selection IS possible without a database, on a small-scale. Once you get bigger and more complex, that's when you may want to start looking at Web frameworks you may have heard about, such as Django and Rails.

10. Most importantly, have fun, and know that you can give people more information than uploading a static chart automatically generated in Excel. Data is fascinating, but it's pretty easy to make it boring/inaccurate if done wrong. Let's make sure neither of those happen!