

Visualizing with Text: Bringing Content to the Fore to Better Assess (Mis)information

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Abstract

In an age of Large Language Models, online misinformation, plagiarism, hate speech, and more—the analysis of text is ever more important. Our traditional statistical visualization tools, however, have lagged behind—geared towards the visual display of quantitative information—rather than text-centric unstructured data. Visualizing with Text characterizes the design-space for directly integrating text and visualization in each other. It builds on the traditional visualization pipeline familiar in statistics and visualization: it adds a) literal text; b) visual attributes such as font weight, x-height and many more; c) mark types ranging from individual alphanumeric characters to paragraphs; and d) representations from extended traditional visualizations such as scatterplots, line charts and treemaps with text marks; to text-centric visualization such as tables, dictionaries and mind-maps. There are many examples of text-centric visualizations as applied to qualitative data and misinformation: including a scatterplot of social media vs. mainstream media; a line chart of tweet popularity; a treemap of human rights; a chart of LLM verbatim responses; mindmaps of LLM knowledge extents; and a table of text for comparison.

Key Words: text visualization, text analytics, NLP, large language models.

1. Introduction

Historically, there has been a strong emphasis in data visualization focusing on quantitative visualization (e.g. Tufte’s *Visual Display of Quantitative Visualization*, Bertin’s *Semiology of Graphics*, or Wilkinson’s *Grammar of Graphics*). This has been exacerbated by statements such as “What gets measured gets managed”, attributed to management expert Peter Drucker.

Need for qualitative analysis. There is a strong need for qualitative data analysis, as articulated by sociologist William Cameron: “Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.” The proliferation of misinformation is difficult to quantify: qualitative analysis may be necessary to assess the nuance of the content. There are many indications of the need for qualitative analytics in business as well, for example:

- Subjective data may align poorly with quantitative data, e.g. 0.53 correlation between users’ subjective rating vs. user performance in Nielsen Norman Group.
- Subjective goals are as important as quantitative goals in career choices (Groysberg and Abrahams).
- When [quantitative] data and anecdotes disagree, the anecdotes are usually right (Jeff Bezos).

Challenges of LLMs. With the introduction of generative AI such as Large Language Models (LLMs), there are more textual analysis problems arising. For example:

- *Plagiarism.* GenAI generates output based on learned input, able to reproduce text and styles of authors and artists (e.g. Noam Chomsky).

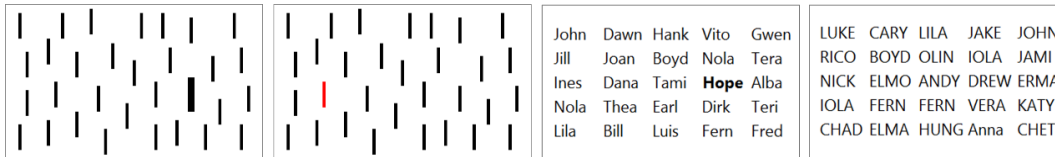


Figure 2: One item is different that the others. Left: difference using preattentive visual attributes size and color. Right difference in typographic attributes of font weight and case.

Note that the differences are perceivable without reading the text – and this technique has been used on maps for hundreds of years. Furthermore, reading can be automatic as shown by the Stroop effect (1935). Automaticity is the ability to perform a well-practiced task with low attentional requirements (Bargh 1994).

2.2 Some non-traditional visualizations use text extensively

As noted above, maps use a lot of text and the text encodes data using typographic attributes such as font weight and capitalization. A review of historical and non-statistical visualizations shows a wide variety of text utilization within visualizations encoding information, such as genealogical diagrams, tables of contents, code editors, artworks (e.g. Cheng), and mindmaps (see Brath, Visualizing with Text, for more examples). A few examples are shown in Figure 3.

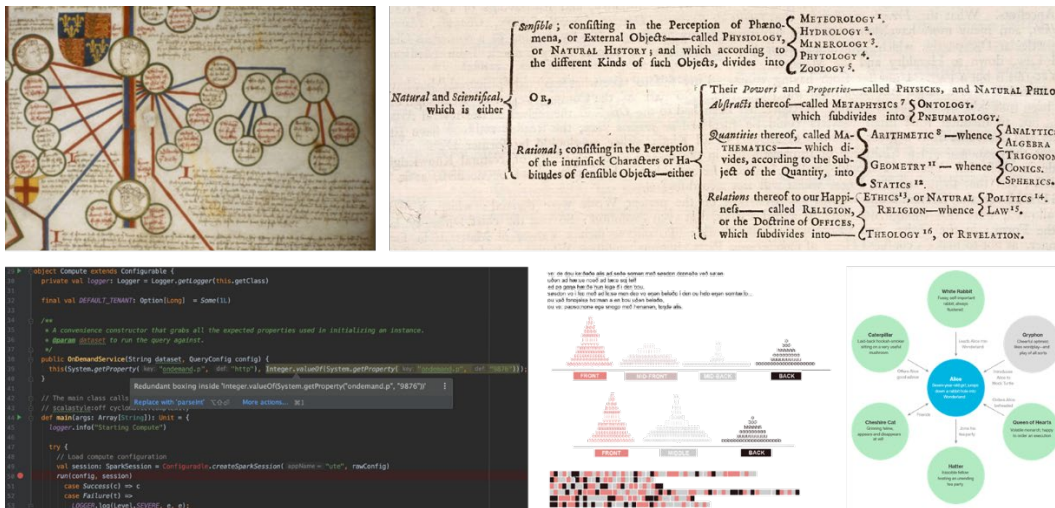


Figure 3: Interesting uses of text in visualizations include (clockwise from top left): genealogical diagrams (text color, text in nodes, intertwined commentary), table of contents (typographic formats, tree layout, phrases), code editor (typographic formats), letter distributions (individual glyphs), and a mind map (sentences in a color-coded graph).

2.3 A design space for text within visualization

Based on a review of these examples (and many others), the range of encodings significantly broaden:

- Data*, extended to include literal text, such as full passages
- Visual attributes*, extended with typographic features, such as glyphs, weight, italics, capitalization, typeface, width and so forth.
- Marks*, which may extend from individual characters, through words and phrases, to sentences and paragraphs.
- Layout*, wherein existing layouts can be extended to use textual marks with typographic or other visual attributes, and other layouts such as tables or mindmaps may be used.

There are many examples of interactive visualizations that can be created using this design space. Some examples are shown in Figure 4, from left to right: a line chart with text along each line; the text from *Alice in Wonderland* with words formatted to facilitate skimming; baseball players by

team, position, and hitting stats in font color, font weight, font width; and thousands of coroner reports by cause of death. These examples are from the *Visualizing with Text* companion website.

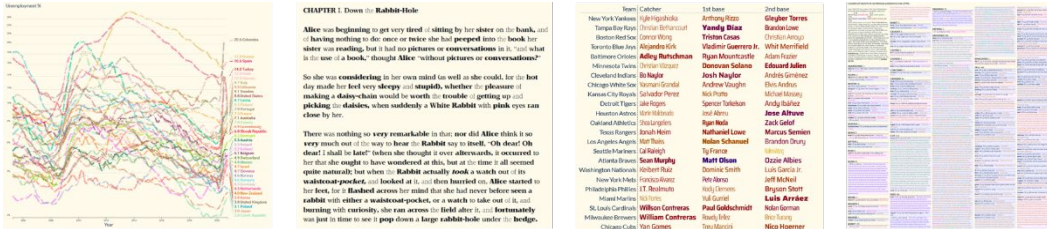


Figure 4: Some snapshots of interactive text visualizations: microtext for lines; prose weighted to aid skimming; a table of baseball players with each name encoding multiple metrics; thousands of causes of deaths from coroners' reports.

3. Visualizing with text examples (with misinformation)

The design space is very large, with thousands of possible permutations. These few examples should aid in understanding the range of extents feasible, as well as possible use towards analysis of misinformation.

3.1 Literal labels, with diverging sentiment example

A simple example uses textual labels to encode data. The scatterplot in Figure 5 shows a scatterplot of 100 public companies' sentiment. Along the x-axis is the sentiment in mainstream media and along the y-axis is the sentiment in social media. One might expect mainstream media and social media to align – i.e. all the companies would be along the diagonal from bottom left to top right. However, there are many companies with mismatched sentiment. This mismatch could be due to misinformation or other information. For example, Volkswagen is near the bottom right – i.e. highly negative social sentiment, but somewhat positive mainstream sentiment. In this case, the divergence is due to timing: this snapshot is somewhat after *Dieseltgate*, wherein Volkswagen had been caught manipulating emissions data. For social media, consumers are highly negative, coming to the realization that their Volkswagen diesel vehicles have lost significant resale value. For mainstream media, *Dieseltgate* is already old news and is now reporting on newer events.

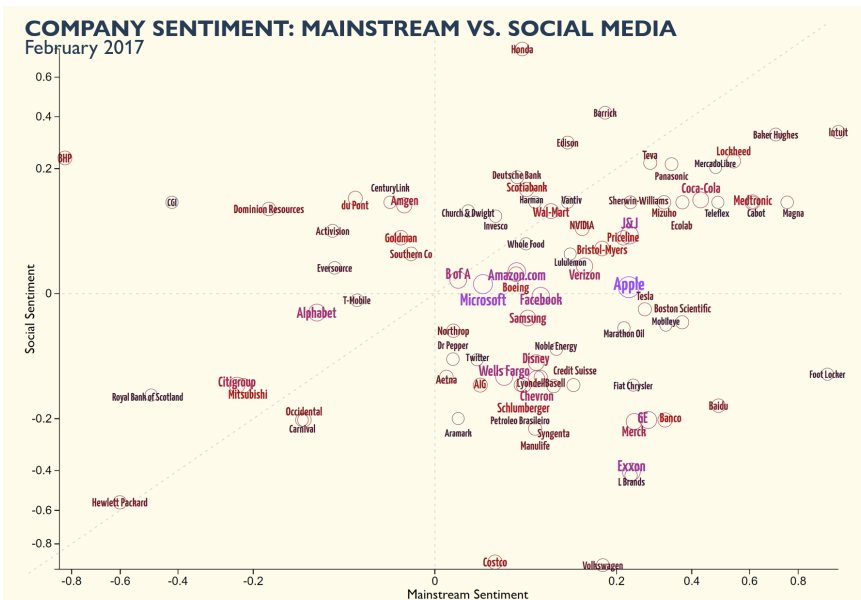


Figure 5: Company sentiment in mainstream media and social media. A divergence may indicate misinformation or other differences.

This visualization would have indicated the sentiment mismatch during the GameStop short squeeze in January 2021, with social media on reddit highly positive and mainstream media informed by shortsellers as highly negative. More broadly, this approach can be used to evaluate a mismatch between any two textual sources, For example, the interactive scatterplots in *What have language models learned* (Pearce, 2021) similarly use labeled scatterplots, to reveal biases in LLMs by gender, region and so on.

3.2 Microtext lines, with social media popularity example

Text in a visualization does not need to be limited to simple labels. The lines in the line chart in Figure 6 have been replaced with microtext tweet content. The overall line indicates the number of retweets over time showing how fast the particular tweet becomes viral. The text is immediately available for inspection. This example is top 5 tweets regarding hurricanes and the fastest growing tweet by a large margin has comedic content. Unfortunately, in an unfolding natural disaster comedy is more viral than safety.

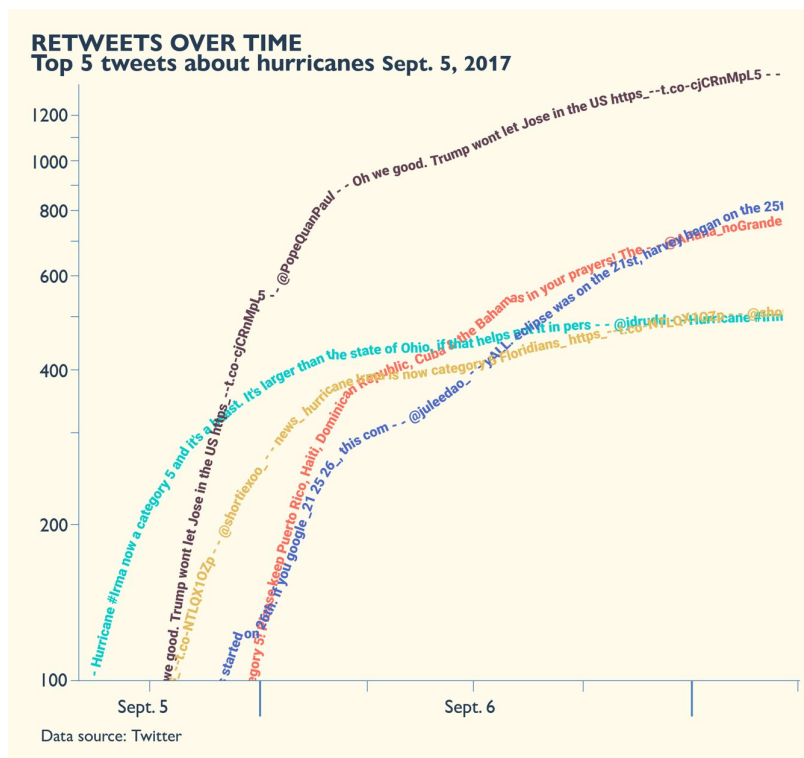


Figure 6: Company sentiment in mainstream media and social media. A divergence may indicate misinformation or other differences.

3.3 Areas with text, with example indicating relation between oil and human rights

Quantitative visualizations require the non-quantitative to be quantified to be represented. This severely limits visualizations' ability to express complex nuanced information. Consider the visualization in Figure 7. The treemap is sized to indicate a countries' oil exports. Oil exports are used to fund state initiatives, including military and/or human rights abuses. How can human rights be visualized? One can search for a singular metric, such as the *Global Peace Index*, here encoded as color. But indexes of qualitative data can be difficult to understand—they attempt to rollup a variety of disparate data. Instead, paragraphs of text can be added to the areas to complement the quantitative values. In this case, text from the lede paragraph of *Human Rights Watch* per country is displayed. Reading the text characterizes what kinds of human rights issues exist in each country. While Russia has a terrible record (most repressive regime since the Soviet era), the UAE also has issues (dissidents detained after completing sentences), as does Saudi Arabia (accountability for the

3.6 Comparison and multiple perspectives (via LLM)

There are many cases where text should be compared. One example is issue analysis: rarely are issues only two sided. “There is always a well-known solution to every human problem—neat, plausible, and wrong” (H.L. Mencken). Thus inspired, an LLM was prompted to create a table of disagreements on bills in U.S. Congress, including arguments for and against by the parties and a third party position, as shown in Figure 11 (color and format added by author). For example, tax cuts are criticized as a benefit for the wealthy, supported as economic stimulus, and criticized for not offsetting tax cuts with spending cuts.

SIGNIFICANT PARTY-LINE VOTES IN CONGRESS FROM 2012-2024				
BILL	Democratic Position	Republican Position	Alternative Position	Senate?
American Rescue Plan Act (2021)	Supported as essential COVID-19 relief providing direct payments and unemployment benefits	Opposed as excessive spending that could fuel inflation	Libertarian Party: Opposed all COVID relief as government overreach, advocated for complete reopening and no restrictions	✓
Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (2021)	Backed as crucial investment in roads, bridges, broadband	Split support - Some opposed due to cost	Green Party: Criticized as insufficient for climate crisis, demanded larger renewable energy investment	✓
Inflation Reduction Act (2022)	Supported as climate action and healthcare cost reduction	Opposed as potential to worsen inflation	Progressive Caucus (within Democrats): Criticized as too modest, wanted Medicare for All and Green New Deal	✓
For the People Act (2021)	Supported to expand voting rights	Opposed as federal overreach	Constitution Party: Opposed as unconstitutional, advocated returning all election control to states	✗
John Lewis Voting Rights Act (2021)	Backed to restore VRA protections	Opposed as unnecessary intervention	ACLU (Advocacy Group): Supported but criticized as not going far enough on preclearance provisions	✗
Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (2012)	Supported healthcare reform	Opposed as government overreach	Socialist Party USA: Criticized for not establishing single-payer healthcare system	✓
Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (2017)	Opposed as benefiting wealthy	Supported as economic stimulus	Libertarian Party: Supported tax cuts but criticized for not matching with spending cuts	✓
First Step Act (2018)	Supported reform	Mostly supported	ACLU: Supported but criticized for not addressing mandatory minimums comprehensively	✓
Build Back Better Act (2021)	Backed social programs	Opposed spending scale	Working Families Party: Supported but demanded stronger labor provisions and wealth tax	✗
American Health Care Act (2017)	Opposed ACA repeal	Supported as replacement	Tea Party Groups: Opposed as not fully repealing ACA	✗
George Floyd Justice in Policing Act (2021)	Supported police reform	Opposed undermining law enforcement	Black Lives Matter: Criticized as insufficient, called for more fundamental restructuring of policing	✗
COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act (2021)	Supported addressing hate crimes	Mixed support	Asian American Justice Groups: Supported but criticized for focusing on enforcement rather than prevention	✓

Font weight indicates difference (in %) for/against vote: thin for a thin margin, **heavyweight for big margin** (0-1, 1-2, 2-3, 3-5, 5-10, 10-25, 25-50, 50-75, 75-100)
 Cell fill color indicates degree of support from aligned (unsaturated) to opposed/criticized (saturated)
 Data and analysis generated by Claude AI 10/25/2024 in response to: Create a table of top disagreements by bill by votes in Congress by Republicans vs Democrats for each of the last 12 years. Present it as a table, with the bill in the first column and the strongest argument for/against in the next two columns. Also include vote counts, and an additional column, with an additional strongly expressed third party position, significantly different from the Democratic/Republican position. Include the identity of that third party if available. Formats added by author.

Figure 11: Table of bills with various arguments supporting or criticizing those bills.

The approach could be expanded in many ways, to include more positions, to count the frequency of different positions, positions of specific people, social media response, assessments by population subsets, impact forecasts, and so on.

With regards to misinformation and disinformation on the Internet, much content can hide behind fake accounts, robots, and so forth: the originator is unknown. However, authors use various stylistic cues in their text, and these cues identify their community. Earlier Natural Language Processing technology (NLP) was limited in detection of these stylistic devices: for example, rhetorical devices such as metaphors were near impossible to extract from text. LLMs can extract, use and reuse these devices, known as *text style transfer*. This same technique can be used to generate style, or, extract style from text. Figure 12 shows a few examples of frequent rhetorical devices used by various personas, with color and intensity indicating frequency and rank. For example, film noir detectives frequently use metaphors, pirates often use rhyme. Furthermore, each cell contains textual examples, which aid the viewer to further characterize the stylistic device: e.g., pirates use nautical and treasure themes; the detective uses gritty urban crime references. Using these techniques on suspect text in the opposite direction can help characterize the sources of misinformation.

The comparison of many responses is also a critical task in the development of LLMs. Google’s LLM Comparator (Kahn et al, 2024) uses tables of responses to assess the quality of responses by variants of LLMs (or variants of prompts).

RHETORICAL DEVICE BY PERSONALITY W/ EXAMPLES
 What are examples of the rhetorical device of <row> when speaking in the voice of <column>

DEVICE	Pirate	Ned Flanders	Hard-boiled film noir detective										
Rhyme		"Okily dokily, neighborino!" "Hiddily-ho, here we go!" "Golly gee, can't you see?" "Thanks a bunch, you're my hunch!"											
Metaphor (and simile)	"The open sea is a vast, untamed beast, ready to devour any ship that dares cross its path." "His eyes gleamed <i>like</i> pieces of sparkling gold, glinting in the sun like stolen treasure." "She moved through the waves with the grace of a mermaid, dancing with the ocean's rhythm." "The storm raged on, its fury <i>as</i> fierce as a dragon breathing fire upon our sails."		"The city was a cold, unfeeling mistress, its streets paved with broken dreams." "Her smile was a dagger, sharp and dangerous, slicing through the smoky room." "The truth was buried deep, like a body in an unmarked grave." "The rain was a curtain of sorrow, washing away the sins of the city."										
Simile	<table border="1"> <tr> <td>Frequency</td> <td>Response Rank</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>1 2 3 4 5</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Frequently</td> <td> </td> </tr> <tr> <td>Often</td> <td> </td> </tr> <tr> <td>Occasionally</td> <td> </td> </tr> </table>	Frequency	Response Rank		1 2 3 4 5	Frequently	 	Often	 	Occasionally	 		"She moved through the crowd like a panther stalking its prey." "His voice was as smooth as polished marble, concealing the cracks beneath." "The rain fell relentlessly, like tears from a remorseless sky." "Her laughter cut through the room like shattered glass, sharp and piercing."
Frequency	Response Rank												
	1 2 3 4 5												
Frequently	 												
Often	 												
Occasionally	 												
Pun		"Bibleopoly? More like 'Bible-oh-my!'" "Why settle for 'all things considered' when you can have 'all things Rod-didered?'" "He's got a 'Flanders Field' of expertise when it comes to gardening." "I'm in 'Flanderful' spirits today, my friends!"											
Repetition	"Avast, ye scurvy dogs! Avast, I say!" "Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum! Yo ho ho!" "Land ho! Land ho, me hearties!"	"Okily dokily!" "Hi-diddly-ho, neighborino!" "Feelin' fine and dandy, diddly-dandy!"	"I had seen it all before, the lies, the betrayals, the darkness. It was the same old song and dance, a never-ending cycle of corruption and despair."										

Figure 12: Small portion of a table indicating frequency of rhetorical device by persona with example quotes.

4. Constructing and evaluating text-centric visualizations

Text-centric visualizations are not pervasive. These techniques do not exist as popular ready-made tools. Some open-source software can handle longer text phrases: e.g., Cytoscape is graph-drawing software used, in part, to create Figure 10. The output in Figure 9 was partially processed using an Excel macro. Figures 5 and 6 use the open-source library D3.js with Javascript code—about 100 lines of code are required for each. Alternatively, LLMs are improving at generating visualizations. Figure 14 was generated with a prompt to Claude, roughly as follows: *Here is a dataset <tab delimited data>. Create a scatterplot. Use year on the x-axis, emotion on the y-axis. Include labels with each item, set the font size to frequency, and color to emotion. Use associative colors, e.g. red for anger, and include a legend.* The LLM struggled to improve the title and legend, these were added manually. However, each generation of LLMs will improve: as per Ethan Mollick in *Co-Intelligence: Living and Working with AI*, "Today's AI is the worst AI you will ever use."

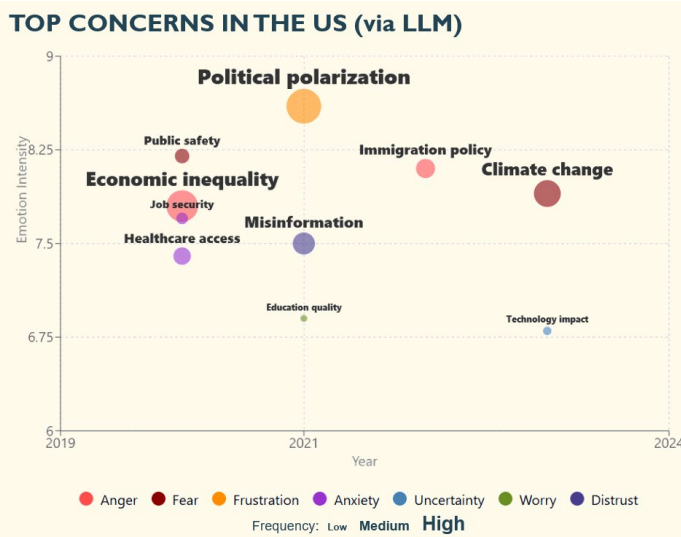


Figure 13: Table of bills with various arguments supporting or criticizing those bills, generated by an LLM, Oct 2024.

The effectiveness of text-visualizations can be assessed with various quantitative and qualitative evaluations, such as measurement of tasks, or following the nested model for visualization (user goals, user task definition, appropriate encodings, appropriate algorithms—see Munzner). Lang and Nacenta (2022) have done extensive perceptual studies evaluating typographic encodings, largely confirming the above techniques can be effective.

5. Conclusion

Visualization of qualitative data, including significant text, has always been feasible as historic examples illustrate. A framework for the use of text within visualization helps to frame the breadth of possibilities. The examples show a variety of applications for textual analyses, including examples related to information potentially subject to manipulation or errors whether by deliberate misinformation, or by faults from textual processing and generation, such as Large Language Models. While a single toolset for generating the breadth of text visualization does not exist, there are many potential approaches to creating these visualizations.

There is much future work. The examples of misinformation visualization above show how text visualizations *could* show misinformation. Stronger analytical techniques, both qualitative and quantitative, should be used together with the visualizations to create more thorough analyses. Most of the examples have some interaction, such as tooltips, filtering, zoom, and so on. Much more interaction is feasible and could aid more through analytical workflows, for example, drill-through to original sources, on-demand explanations, and so on.

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