

I Felt an Earthquake Today

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ABSTRACT

This project attempts to explore how users consume and react to news of a devastating natural disaster. It began as an exploration in visualizing data in a more humanistic manner. Rather than merely reading facts and understanding data points, this project allows users to connect to the people and emotions involved in news stories. A number of design prototypes were created to test how data can evoke emotional resonance. The current iteration is represented as a web-based interface, which provides users with two possible pathways for interaction. These pathways engage users and connect them to important, earthquake-related content.

Keywords

Data visualization, interface design, user experience design, earthquakes

METHODS

Inspired by the 11 March 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, this project began as an exercise in how to connect viewers to their media consumption of natural disasters. The Sci Art Sci blog speaks of an earthquake as a “physical sensation” and “spectacle” which entrances victims of actual disasters and users of interpretive art pieces alike [5]. With these thoughts in mind, what would be the most emotionally resonant experience of news of an earthquake for a user? Should the physical shaking of such an event be simulated? Is there another way to represent the shaking, but in such a way that users are not undergoing a physical experience?

Implementation

After various attempts to create an interactive data visualization, the project was ultimately developed as a web-based interface. The web interface allowed users to interact with dynamic content more seamlessly. Users are shown a static visualization of the number of New York Times (NYT) article mentions of the word “earthquake” since May 2010 [6]. Those mentions are then compared with the number of article mentions of “earthquake aid” in the same time period. This juxtaposition was included to give users a sense of the disparity between the media’s focus on disaster news and the amount of aid we, as news consumers, contribute to these disasters. Additionally, users are provided with two possible pathways for

interaction. Users can decide to learn more about a recent earthquake or about how to give help to those who have recently experienced such a disaster. Twitter tweets are shown, and with each mouse click, a new tweet is displayed to the user, encouraging them to continue reading and clicking. The interaction engages users, connecting them to important content.

The displayed content is meant to elicit an emotional reaction from the user. Most tweets displayed are informational and thus teach the user about current earthquakes occurring worldwide.

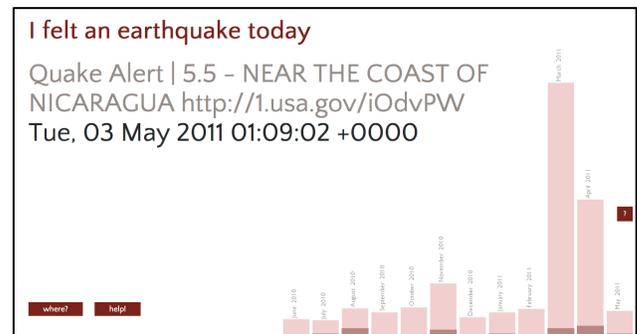


Figure 1 Screenshot of web interface, with informational tweet

CONCLUSION

While this project resulted in many experimental prototypes of data visualizations and interfaces, there is still much to be resolved as a final project. The current manifestation does not provide a completely unique user experience or the emotional resonance that the designer intended. This project will continue to explore how to combine the multiple data sources together to tell one compelling story, instead of piecing together many disconnected stories.

REFERENCES

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