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Information+ Conference: A necessary reflection

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In June 2016, Isabel Meirelles (OCAD U, Toronto, Canada) and Katherine Gillieson (ECUAD, Vancouver, Canada) organized the conference *Information+*, at Emily Carr University of Art & Design in Vancouver. With an emphasis on data visualization, the conference highlighted the complexity and interdisciplinarity of the field. During the conference, journalists, statisticians, computer scientists, cognitive psychologists, social scientists, managers, designers and educators, discussed current issues, practices and research in data visualization. The richness of the discussion from these very different points of view presented a territory of the field seldom explored. The specific challenges identified were related to technology and research gaps. The conference emphasized the need to foster collaborations and research within these varied fields in order to gather evidence and identify what works, when it works, for whom it works, and why it works.

Most designers deal with data in their daily work to create policy; to understand and compare different situations; to influence behaviour and make decisions so as to reduce problems and improve people's lives. During the conference, more than thirty speakers and an exhibition created a context in which to discuss current opportunities and challenges in data visualization, and outlined future possibilities.

The variety of the different disciplinary points of view and the diversity of the topics presented provided a space where researchers, practitioners and educators shared experiences and knowledge; gathered new perspectives and created new connections and networks. The rich scope of the conference shed light on the breadth of the term *data visualization*, its different understandings and range of problems covered: data for journalism, data to ground conversations for academic planning, data to present medical evidence to healthcare providers and patients, and data to engage the public in participatory democratic approaches. A common challenge was also identified: how to help readers gain insights which can help them to undertake informed actions.

The discussions which took place during the conference also presented a great opportunity for multidisciplinary collaborations. For readers interested in further details visit: http://informationplusconference.com.

It was stressed during the conference that for these collaborations to be successful, stakeholders, decision-makers, professionals and researchers from different fields, and the public need more training in creating, coaching the creation and/or interpreting visualizations. The lack of this training results in misunderstandings about what data visualization is and can do, and diminishes its impact. Some believe that the secret lies in the computer software used, others that it is about making the design attractive and fun, and others that it is about presenting lots of information in different formats, rather

than organizing and presenting relevant information to facilitate understanding and action. This poor interpretation of data visualization negatively affects the job of information designers working in this field. Indeed the training of people in this field is not only welcome, but also necessary. Perhaps this is a central problem that needs further exploration and development.

Information+ was the beginning of a very interesting and relevant discussion that needs to be continued. With an impeccable organization, *Information+* left most attendees and participants looking forward to the next one, perhaps an *Information+ 2*.

About the author

Dr. **Guillermina Noël** applies a human-centred, evidence-based, and outcomes-oriented design approach to improve healthcare. She holds a PhD in Design Sciences from the University IUAV of Venice, Italy, and a Master of Design from the University of Alberta, Canada. Over the last thirteen years she has been doing research with healthcare providers, researchers and managers to reduce antibiotic prescription, change nutritional habits, improve safety in hospitals, and communicate best practices to healthcare providers. She is the director of the Health Design Network. She lives in Edmonton, Alberta and is engaged in design research with University of Alberta Health Sciences' teams.

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