September 9, 2009

Dear Shan Carter, Amanda Cox, Kevin Quealy and Amy Schoenfeld,

I have had an opportunity to look at your interactive visualization in New York Times with the title “How Different Groups Spend Their Day” available at the following URL: http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2009/07/31/business/20080801-metrics-graphic.html. I am impressed that the graphical data presentation of American Time Use Survey allows me to easily recognize at a glance daily time usage by percentages over time and I would like to leave some feedbacks for improvement.

The interactive graphic, as mentioned above, effectively shows how people in each labor group spend their time in daily activities over 24-hour span with a short analysis of graph. For expert users it also provides us with the details in percentage of people for a certain activity in every ten minute and the result comparison of each activity for subgroup in the same category in terms of average time spent per day, moving mouse pointer or clicking mouse only a few times with shortcuts. I like these features to effectively show information and to easily interact with users regardless of level of their experience level. In addition, it works well over various web browsers such as Internet Explorer or Firefox, generating graphics smoothly with reasonable speed.

Despite effectiveness of presenting data for each labor group, it is not easy to compare daily activities between two labor groups. For example, the related article to the graphic said “On an average weekday, the unemployed sleep an hour more than their employed peers.” I had a hard time to find out the analysis on the visualization with several mouse clicks, realizing that unemployed people are more likely to stay awake at night than employed people although more percent of the unemployed get up late. I think it would be better to have a menu or an option such as using checkbox to directly compare two overlapped graphs of ‘Sleeping’ between ‘unemployed’ and ‘employed’.

Another suggestion would be about consistency in labels. The color of labels for ‘Socializing’ and ‘Sleeping’ is black while the color for rest of them is white, so that black labels might not be identified as same as white ones. Regarding consistency of design, I would like to suggest using the same color (white) for every label, making background colors with black label a bit darker. I am positive on displaying major labels with large portion not all the labels, but concerned about using a label ending with ‘…’ which cuts a label in. How about using a full label instead? (check an example at URL: http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2008/02/23/movies/20080223_REVENUE_GRAPHIC.html#)
Enjoying the experience with this decent information visualization technique, I hope to see more progress on it.

Regards,
Hyoungtae Cho

hcho5 at cs.umd.edu
Graduate Student
Department of Computer Science
University of Maryland