Dear New York Times Interactive Team

My name is Ginnah Lee who is taking a graduate course “Information Visualization” in University of Maryland. I am writing you for commenting about one of your interactive visualization, “How different groups spend their day” http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2009/07/31/business/20080801-metrics-graphic.html as homework of that course.

The first impression on this visualization is that it is very intuitive to use and informative. Regardless the level of expertness of users, it provides interesting information about the time usage of people over time. By just moving mouse point over the graph or clicking on any interesting category, one can get enough information which is essential to understand the time usage in both ways, one is at every 10 minute of a day how people use their time and the other is how many times people use time for a specific category. Thus, basically I think that with this visualization, users can play with the information very easily getting more useful and advanced information from them.

Now I would like to say about more detailed issue rather than the basic impression. One thing I considered importantly is the purpose of this visualization. Even though it gives the ease of use to people, the more crucial function it should provide is conveying the intended information. Following the related article (http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/02/business/02metrics.html), I realized this visualization was brought up on purpose to compare time usages of two classes, especially employed and unemployed people. And, in order to compare those two groups with the visualization, I had to click the buttons which are located above the graph. The graph is changed very quickly when clicking the labeled button, so I can see the difference of whole time usage between groups very well. Also, while seeing the average time usage of a specific category, one can change the group which he wants to see by the same way, clicking the labeled buttons. Then he will compare the groups without any difficulty. Even this visualization provides all purposed information with reasonable ease of use, however, comparing groups by clicking buttons are not good for novice users. Most of people want to see the important information at a glance. They even do not try to click buttons which are apart from main graph. Thus, what I want to suggest are two features. One is providing more attractive interface which can catch user’s attention to click on. From this feature, users can get more information and have fun using this visualization. The other one is the overlapped graph feature. Especially, in a specific category, if it provides the overlapped graph between groups, users can see the difference at a glance, not by clicking the labeled buttons. Keeping from too complicated graph, overlapped graph for whole time usage might be implemented by giving some check box form to users.

Thank you for reading my letter. I appreciate your contribution on visualization. And, I really hope my comment would be little help for improving your design of future.

Sep 9, 2009

Sincerely,
Ginnah Lee
Electrical and Computer Engineering Dept.
University of Maryland

ginnah@umd.edu