Dear Mr. Ericson and Ms. Cox,

I am a graduate student of University of Maryland, taking a course of Information Visualization this semester. As a homework, we are assigned to choose one of New York Times interactive visualization and write a critique. Among the list of visualizations, “What’s Cooking on Thanksgiving”

From the choropleth maps, it is very intuitive to see what Thanksgiving Day recipes are frequently searched in each state in the U.S.. Thus I can understand what foods are served in families in different areas. This is especially interesting for me, as a foreigner, since we do not have Thanksgiving Day in Japan, and I believe understanding the food culture of the country I live is important. Nevertheless, I would have appreciated this work even more if some interaction features were improved. For example, ways to access different maps, clustering maps by kinds of foods, and a use of colors.

First of all, I thought having only “next” and “previous” buttons to move to different maps were cumbersome. Since there are fifty different maps, it is easier for users to jump to different maps using shortcuts. One idea is to make a list of links, so they directly lead to different maps, such as one done for this visualization.

Another feature that could be added is clustering and over-view by kinds of foods. I felt it is interesting to compare areas by kind of dishes searched, like “people in north-eastern part search apple pie recipes, and south-eastern people look for sweet potato pie recipes.” Since users have small amount of short term memory, they forget what one map showed when they are on another map. By showing all maps clustered by kinds of foods, it is easy to compare geographic difference in preference.

Finally, I believe use of colors should be revised. In the first map, difference in colors indicates significant gap in number of searches (difference between top and bottom is 300.) However, even though difference is much less on the last map (difference is about 40), the same color order is used, which could lead users to misunderstand the significance. This happens because percentage is used to differ colors on maps, so one way to solve this problem is to used actual numbers of searches to differentiate colors, and preferably remove those maps that do not show significant differences.

After all, I appreciate your visualisation. I hope my suggestions are helpful for improving the quality of your work and improved one will be loved by more users.

Sincerely yours,

Kotaro Hara