Dear Mr. Ericson,

I am an MS student in Dr. Ben Shneiderman’s Information Visualization class at the University of Maryland. I am writing in regards to the interactive visualization “Top One Percent” (http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/01/15/business/one-percent-map.html).

I found this visualization to be both intuitive and informative. Upon arriving at the webpage, most part of the webpage is inactive and the user is asked to enter a household income and click “go”. After an arbitrary number is entered, the map will first display the percentile across the United States to show a big picture, then the user can zoom in to get more detail info for the area of interest. The display is very pleasant and the whole process is straight forward.

However, I do have some suggestions that might improve the user experience of this visualization.

First of all, the states of Alaska and Hawaii are missing. If it is due to the difficulty of displaying these two states, I think it’s better to display them on the lower left part of the map as common practice. Or, if it’s due to the lack of data, then the title of this visualization should state this clearly.

Secondly, it takes me lots of clicks and drags to zoom to the areas on the east and west coasts because the map always zooms in based on the center point of the current map. I guess lots of NYTimes’s readers would also be interested in these population-dense areas. I’d suggest that you add a place for the user to enter a zip code (or name of the city) on top of the map so the user can zoom to that place with one click.

Thirdly, the current design doesn’t provide an easy way to get reversal of some actions. Once the user click on the map, the info associated with that certain area will display to the left of the map, and the user can’t go back and see his number of percentage among all U.S. households again, at least not without zooming in (at that point a “Zoom to U.S.” link will appear).

And there are some minor issues with simple error handling. A mistake with the input for household income (“55t00” instead of “55500”) will result in the display of info for “$5,500” which might be misleading. I think an error massage to ask for another input will be better.
Another minor issue could happen if this visualization is displayed on a monitor with a resolution of 1024*768 or lower: the entire map can’t fit in the screen right after the user click “go”. Then the natural reaction of some users would be to use the mouse middle button to scroll down the page without dragging the scroll bar. But after one down movement, the mouse cursor is on top of the map and it will be captured and turned into “zoom” mode. So the user get stuck and confused. This problem can be solved by using the page scroll bar instead, but I think it may be better to disable the middle button zoom function to avoid this possible confusion all together.

Overall, this is a great visualization and I enjoyed it a lot. If you have any questions about my suggestions, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,
Chenglin Chen