September 11, 2012

The Editor,
The New York Times

Dear Editor,
I am Raj, an HCI graduate student at the University of Maryland – College Park. This semester I have taken an Info Visualization class with Prof. Ben Shneiderman and for one of the assignments we are looking into the various visualizations available on the NY Times website.

Let me begin with commending you and the team for all for the great visualizations you have put for different topics. They are all intuitive and at times eye opener. I was especially interested in the comparison of Facebook’s IPO to other major companies. Please allow me to write a small critique on the visualization for same available here¹.

On the first look, I liked the idea of using circles to represent each organization, with the size of the circle a representative of the value at IPO. It gives the readers/users a quick sense of the companies that had a huge presence and accompanied market sentiments when it went public.
I liked the fact that you have a search bar to search for organizations, and also have an Ajax enabled suggestions list, and the fact that a successful search will list more details about the organization and also give a border to the circle representing the company is very intuitive and easy to understand. The idea to keep the display area simpler by having multiple pages for different types of visualization is also worth noting. Hovering the mouse over the circle will give information about the organization and is very much expected, and hiding them by default is the best way to keep the display area clean.

While a lot of creativity was definitely involved in creating this visualization, allow me to give some suggestions to further improve the visualization in terms of features, ease of understanding and interaction techniques.

1. While it’s pretty clear that each circle represents one organization, there is no indication as to what different colors mean. Some are red, maroon, violet-grey and some blue. Were they colored based on the year of IPO (seems like that) or by some segment of the industry? I would strongly recommend using a ‘legend’ section explaining the keys to the colors.

2. When searching for an organization, most people will definitely make use of the suggested list, but still at times users can type in a ‘dummy’ company name and there is no indication if this was accepted of not. A subtle error message (displayed as one of the suggestion items) could be beneficial.

3. I was very much hoping to see some forms of filters that I could have applied to the list of available companies. Some important filters could be:
   a. Type of Organization (“All”, “Internet Companies”, “Social Networking Sites”, and say even “California Companies”).
   b. Years to IPO (0, 1-5,5-10, >10) etc.

4. One more feature that could be an addition would be the capability to select multiple companies so that we could easily compare and create custom views.

5. Additionally, in this era or social networking, I would have expected to be able to share a view of the visualization that I consider worthy.

I hope that you will take all the above-mentioned criticisms in a positive way and will consider them for future visualizations.

Sincerely,
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