Dear Mr. Ericson,

I am a student at the University of Maryland, College Park, enrolled in Professor Ben Shneiderman’s course on Information Visualization. As part of an assignment I have developed a critique of the New York Times interactive visualization *At the Republican Convention, Words Being Used*.

*At the Republican Convention* displays a collection of words and short phrases used at the 2012 Republican National Convention. The phrases appear in bubbles, with the frequency of each word determining the size of its bubble. The user can click on a phrase to view samples of its usage, and also add phrases of interest to the set.

I imagine that the guiding principal of this visualization is exploration. It provides tools that may help the user discover a pattern or other interesting feature in a large amount of text. This initial display of phrases both explains the functionality to the user and jumpstarts the creative process by making the user think of other phrases that might be interesting to add. The ability to move these phrases around within a force-directed layout lets the user organize them conceptually.

This encouragement of exploration might also be expanded. For example, a user might be interested in tracking the comments of a particular politician, perhaps by selecting the politician’s name as the user would a phrase at the top. Another interesting feature would be the ability to select multiple phrases. This would filter the samples to ones that include all selected phrases, so that the user can see how different concepts relate (for instance, “Obama” and “business”).

I would also be interested to see the same visualization done for the most recent Democratic National Convention. This could be combined with the Republican visualization by color-coding the phrases and samples.

I was impressed by the clarity and usability. Probably the most noticeable visual challenge is the spacing of all the information on the page. At the top, the phrase-bubble display can become cluttered as the user adds more phrases. Additionally, one of the initial phrases might not be related to the user’s interests, or one of the user-added phrases might have a negligible frequency. If the visualization allowed the user to remove phrases as well as add them, it would both reduce clutter and let the user focus in on a group of phrases of interest.

Also, repeatedly selecting phrases and reading samples requires a good amount of scrolling. I expect that a lot of the time these samples serve the purpose of giving a general idea of how politicians use a selected phrase. Displaying a subsample of the samples up at the top, to the sides of the bubble diagram, might be a good way to let users get a quick look at a phrase’s usage without scrolling:
Finally, I’m sure that older viewers would appreciate being able to adjust the text size in the bubble display, since the less frequent phrases become very small.

Thanks for your time, and for providing these interesting visualizations,

Isaac Julien
ijulien6@gmail.com