Mr. Bostock and Mr. Ericson:

My name is Nicholas Fung and I am currently a PhD student at the University of Maryland. As part of a course on information visualization taught by Dr. Ben Shneiderman, I was asked to critique an example of an interactive visualization on the New York Times website. I studied the visualization “At the Republican Convention” (http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/08/28/us/politics/convention-word-counts.html) and would like to send you my thoughts.

I found this visualization to be fascinating and fun to explore. I think it is very effective in sharing quick and easy to understand information on the RNC. The interface was very well designed with intuitive controls and an attention grabbing aesthetic. The initial movement of the labeled circles conveyed that they could be manipulated and adding new circles through the search box came quickly. I think it is very clear what each circle represents, using size as a visual cue to represent frequency. The pull of the bubbles toward the center of the visualization also creates some emergent organization, as smaller bubbles tend to collect toward the middle.

The ability to click words within the excerpts to select bubbles provides context and reinforces the meaning of the circles. However, I think there should have been a control to choose any word within the speech excerpts to add as a circle. Along similar lines, it would have helped to be able to expand the speech excerpts to provide more context and information to the user.

I believe small changes can help the user with error handling and the ability to manage the displayed information. A spell checker would prevent some amount of user error. A delete feature would allow the user to have greater control in exploring the overall context of the information by selectively adding or removing word bubbles as well as the ability to undo mistakenly added circles. A related feature would be a reset button to allow the user to return to a base state. Another feature could be a pull-down menu for political topics such as “economy” or “immigration”. Selecting a topic would clear the visualization and display bubbles for designated words related to that topic. For organizational purposes, it would also be useful for a user to be able to pin circles into place or create boundaries that the circles will not cross.

I am also unsure of the benefit to adding bubbles for words that have zero occurrences. While it is useful to know if a word was not used, I do not believe it needs to persist as a circle. Perhaps the application could prompt the user to display or hide such words.

Thank you for your time in reading through my critique. I am sure you have considered many of these points when creating the original design and I would be interested to hear your response to some of my design ideas. I greatly enjoyed exploring your application and using it to better understand the design of visualization techniques.

Sincerely,

Nick Fung