

Visualizing the Future Project Proposal

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I am a data visualization librarian working in a large health sciences library in the middle of a large city in the United States. I am also a brown woman working in a profession that is predominantly (at my most recent check, nearly 88%) white. More specifically, I engage in work that is dominated by the tech industry, which also lacks commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. I say this not parrot facts and statistics about the library and technology professions, but rather to provide context to my interest in the topic of critical data visualization, particularly in consideration of race, gender, sexuality, and ability status. “Best practices” and tutorials for data visualization often follow the advice of white, Western, sexist, cisgender, heteronormative, and ableist lines of thinking. Libraries have an opportunity to step into the world of data visualization and empower historically marginalized and underrepresented voices in big data. I would like to explore the intersections of social justice issues and data visualization. If we’re visualizing the future, we need to consider *who* we’re visualizing for, *what* we’re visualizing, and *why* we’re visualizing.

My plan for researching this topic area would focus initially on diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in libraries and tech in order to build a foundation in social justice work in those spaces. From there, I would explore how data visualization and social justice work takes place in libraries and the level of engagement in different types of libraries (academic, school, hospital, special collections, and so on) and subject areas in academia (humanities, medicine, public health, journalism, information studies, and other major departments across university and school campuses). If possible, I would also like to survey libraries to learn more about what they believe their data visualization needs and experiences are, if any. Ideally, this type of survey would be answered by multiple types of libraries and classifications of library workers. Essentially, I would like to conduct an environmental scan of data visualization and social work in libraries.

The more interesting part of the research will move into somewhat uncharted territory – that is, finding the intersections of social justice, data visualization, and library instruction. While there is some preliminary research in social justice and data visualization, there is a lack of information on how to package lessons and teach a more inclusive approach to data visualization. My efforts would concentrate on taking social justice pedagogy and data visualization tutorials and combining them into a digestible and shareable format. I welcome this exciting challenge and have already begun thinking about considerations to keep in mind when doing this work.

As a librarian, I am often invited for instruction sessions in classes to teach data visualization and specific data visualization tools, such as Tableau. I aim to incorporate more material on the intersections of social justice and data visualization in my instruction sessions and consultations, particularly when speaking to students in social work, journalism, public health, and other disciplines that place a heavy focus on social justice. In addition, I am currently an affiliate with the eScience Institute on the University of Washington campus. The Institute teaches a Data Science for Social Good class and I would like to better contribute and teach data visualization sections for that course. I am taking my preliminary research and course content to that class in summer 2019, but my goal is to spark a larger conversation across campus and with library partners about data visualization and society.

I desire a greater discussion about data visualization and social justice across all professions that engage in data visualization, and my starting point is in libraries. Libraries need to have a voice in data and data visualization and they are in a unique position to improve data/social justice literacy within their staff and also within their patrons. The future of data visualization must value historically underrepresented and marginalized voices and “best practices” must evolve to become more inclusive. If this work does not happen, the future of data visualization will be stuck in our present.

Thank you for your consideration.