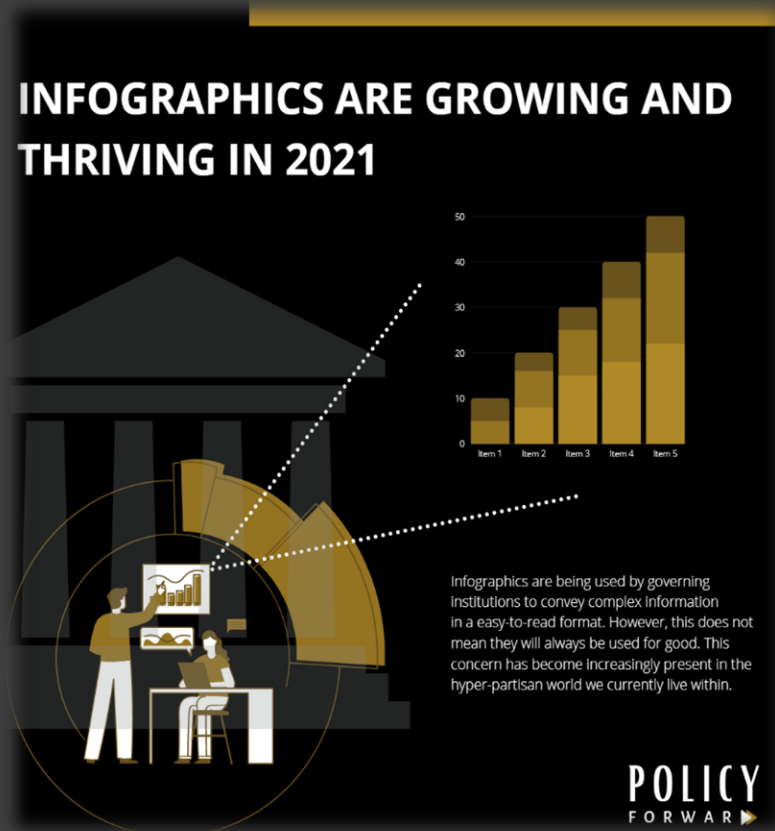


Infographics are Growing and Thriving in 2021

Written by: Lucas Liberty

A few weeks ago, I was prompted by one of the Policy Forward consultants to look into the efficacy of infographics relative to that of textual information. The consultant expressed that they believed the

graphics may detract from more elaborate textual language, seeing as infographics' information sharing capacity is limited by the space of a screen and often only convey a few points of information. Others in the meeting chimed in to suggest that perhaps the graphics would work to support textual information, or were more easily understood by an array of audiences. I, intrigued by the varying opinions, sought out to better understand this topic.



This topic has also become more important in light of the drastic increase of infographics used on social media platforms regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. Graphics displaying

daily transmission, hospitalization, and vaccination rates, among others, have acted to inform our citizenry of the situation they face; they have also been used by governments to justify their behaviour (in regards to policy). The inclusion of infographics on social media platforms has also caught the attention of younger audiences who were once disconnected from social issues and public policy, better informing a range of citizenry. Perhaps this will be important for future political apathy, as we currently see an underwhelming amount of youth voters.

First off, it is important to clarify what infographics are. Infographics are much like textual language in that their purpose is to convey information. However, infographics are graphics or illustrations whereas text is, well, text. Infographics can take various shapes and forms, but can be grouped into three main types: data graphics, maps, and diagrams. Within each of these there can be further configuration, including the creation of static, animated, or interactive forms of the graphics. The configuration of an infographic has been shown by several studies to be integral to its efficacy.

So, now, are infographics really all that helpful? Or do they leave one with more questions than they began with? Well, the debate about the effectiveness infographics has heated up in the past few years. A great number of scholars, bloggers and news sources have begun to weigh in, and there seems to be a growing consensus. Infographic language is now thought to be better understood and more easily recalled by humans than textual language. Scholars suggest that infographics in particular can facilitate better learning, memory and recall, communication and inference. In conjunction with text, graphics facilitate better comprehension of a given material both conceptually and concretely, as illustrations can act to clarify frameworks of thinking and also help with understanding how a text applies in a ‘real-life’ context. For example, when adding graphics to a text-based instruction manual, comprehension was over 300% better than for those who only had a text document. Infographics have also been shown to help with adherence to health protocols, both physical and mental. Wielding this knowledge, knowledge producers can better utilize the various tools available to them. Infographics are in fact useful.

This information is quite bewildering. It is commonly accepted that as a child one should be exposed to both; children’s books, for example, are riddled with illustrations to associate the words on the pages with. Over time pictures are replaced by complex sentences, however. Adults have been taught to interact primarily with text documents to gather information. I argue that this is not at all conducive to effective learning. To support this, one must ask the question- What is the science behind this efficacy? Well, infographics leverage the brain’s most dominant capacity, visual processing. The medial temporal cortex is the area of the brain primarily responsible for memory. This part of the brain encodes visuals with much greater detail than text, and therefore visuals are more easily transferred into long-term memory, where they can be quickly recalled when needed. Also, there has been studies showing that the memories of visuals are

more durable. Encoding words, on the other hand, is a task that is distributed across several regions of the brain, resulting in more difficult memorization and recall.

As the team has a particular focus on public policy, I also sought to better understand how graphics are used by governments to communicate important information to its citizenry. It turns out that the infographics are extremely useful and are being used by governing institutions to convey very complex information in a readily understood format. This format of information sharing is increasingly useful especially given the presence of significant, and, at times, overwhelming amounts of information; infographics help filter out the irrelevant information from that which is relevant, largely because of the restrictions they place on their producers who are unable to write twenty pages on an issue that could be summed effectively for a layperson in an animated graphic lasting no longer than twenty seconds. When one feels the need to develop a more in-depth understanding of a topic they should be invited to read more detailed text documents that contain more elaborate explanations for a decision, or some other action by the government.

While graphics are certainly efficacious, this does not mean they will always be used for good. This concern has become increasingly present in the hyper-partisan world we currently live within. When not properly educated on what an infographic is, people may fall victim to poorly produced infographics. For example, graphics creators may dupe their audience by omitting the baseline, in which a graph does not start its axis at zero, making each increase in statistic look far more significant than it truly is. For example, if a graph displaying approval rates did not display the first 50%, a 10% difference in approval would look more like 20%. Without careful examination by the reader, this could cause confusion. Other infographic ‘crimes’ include: manipulating the Y or X-axis so as to manipulate the appearance of data; cherry picking data- which includes the improper extraction and omission of data; using the wrong type of graph to display information; and using unconventional means to display data.

The efficacy of infographics is indisputable. Not only do the graphics work to make information more accessible to the layperson, but can assist in comprehension, inference, memory and recall and thus are useful in any attempt information dissemination; from instruction manuals to government publications and

news releases. Although infographics are unable to contain the same amount of detailed information as textual documents, they are more concise and generally better understood and remembered by layperson audiences. In the case that someone desires a more detailed understanding of the topic, they may simply seek out textual documents (which would also benefit from the integration of infographics).