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I teach Technical Writing and Media Writing at Zayed University in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Before moving to the Middle East in 2007, I lived in southern France, where I taught Managerial Communication at the graduate level. Originally from the United States, I have lived in Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, and South America. My career has included positions as a newspaper reporter, communication consultant, technical writer, and U.S. Foreign Service Officer.

LATCH Unleashed – using organizational principles to improve data graphics

Abstract:

Designers of data graphics are often understandably preoccupied with a multitude of activities, such as mastering software, selecting graph types, or checking the correctness of numbers. Midst the activity, designers may not give full attention to how the underlying information is organized. Yet, whether data graphics are intended for analysis or for presentation purposes, they can be potentially more useful when the designer makes explicit decisions in organizing data graphics. The purpose of this paper is, first, to present a robust method of organizing information that applies equally to text, images, or numbers. A second purpose is to demonstrate the utility of the method by applying it to several examples of published data graphics.

The proposed method for organizing information builds on the system of organizing information set forth by information designer Richard Saul Wurman, who proposed five organizational types characterized by the acronym LATCH—Location, Alphabet, Time, Category, Hierarchy. The proposed method: (1) pairs each organizational type with a related rhetorical concept, (2) adds a sixth organizational type, and (3) re-orders the six types of organization to reflect the relationship that exists among the various types of organization. In addition to these three key changes, a guiding principle is added which helps the designer to take into account such factors as the needs of the audience, the nature of the topic, and the purpose of the designer.

The value of the organizational method can be seen in “before- and-after” examples where original published data graphics are compared with re-organized versions, revised according to precepts of the proposed method for organizing information. Data graphics represent an ideal vehicle for “testing” the value of the organizational method given their hybrid nature, as well as their skeletal structure.