

Introducing the Data Revelations Newsletter

This is the first of a monthly / semi-monthly newsletter for people interested in data visualization and Tableau. I'll be writing about things I've come across in my practice as a developer, consultant, and teacher of data visualization that I hope will help the reader gain inspiration, reduce frustration, and produce better work.

In this issue

In this issue we'll look at some recent [Viz of the Day](#) examples and how they underscore the importance of personalization.

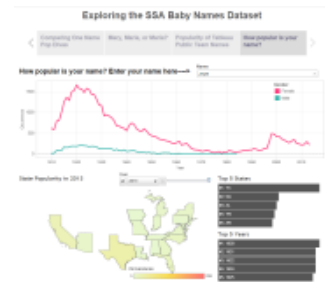
Jewel Loree visualizes the Social Security Administration's baby names database

(Please click [here](#) to explore the visualizations.)

Hits

This collection of views is fun and engaging.

Check out the fourth story point "How popular is your name?" This nails it for me; I dare you to look at this and not type in your own name (and then the name of a friend, relative, etc.)



How popular is your name? Enter your name here-->

Name

Ignatz

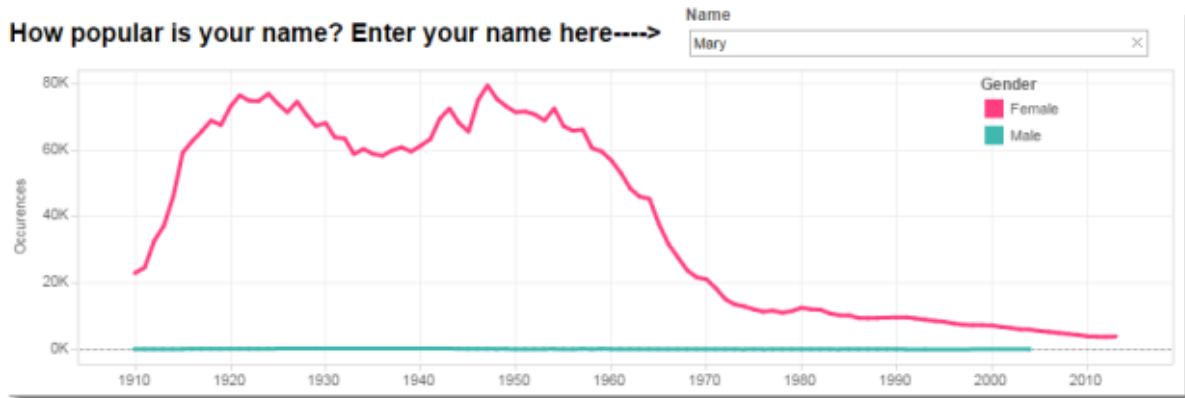
For those that are curious, the last time somebody with the name "Ignatz" applied for a social security card was 1920.

This really underscores how irresistible a dashboard can be when you make it personal. By allowing the user to be part of the visualization you take something that might barely register a "that's interesting" and raise it to a "hey, that's really interesting -- it's about me" level of engagement.

Misses

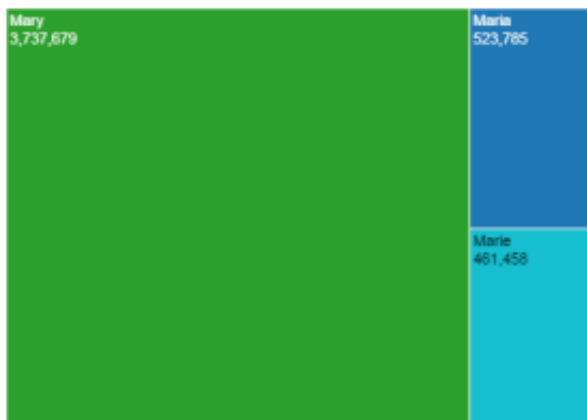
The data is not normalized

The biggest miss for me is that the views that look at name popularity over time are not normalized. The name "Mary" peaked in popularity in 1947 with 79,385 females. What the chart does not take into account is that the population of the United States was 144.1 million vs. 316.5 million in 2013 (the last year in the data set).



I would like the ability to see the percentage of people with a particular name (relative to the total population in a given year or the total number of people applying for a social security number in a given year) and not just a count of names.

Treemaps



I don't think the treemaps shown on the first and second story points are a great choice. That said, if the intent is to show that "Mary" is much more popular than "Maria" and "Marie" (vs. letting people easily see just how much more popular "Mary" is than the other two names) then this chart type is fine, but I still think some variation of a bar chart would be a better choice.

Auto-scaling Axis

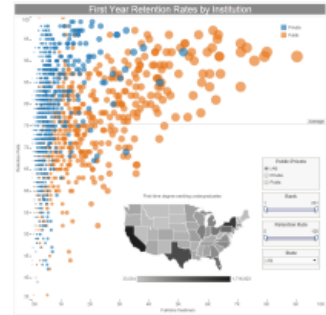
I'd be tempted to put a hidden reference line along the "Occurrences" axis that forces the scale to a certain minimum height (this is in the fourth story point). Look at the axis when you enter the name "John." Now look at the axis when you type "Malcolm."

I'm not convinced I'm right on this one as you won't be able to see any noticeable change over time for the less popular names if you force the axis to go to higher values.

Note: Using a hidden reference line is a better approach than making the axis fixed because you'll run into problems with a fixed axis if you have a value that is smaller or larger than you had anticipated.

Shorelight Education visualizes first year retention rates for colleges and universities in the United States

(Please click [here](#) to explore the dashboard.)

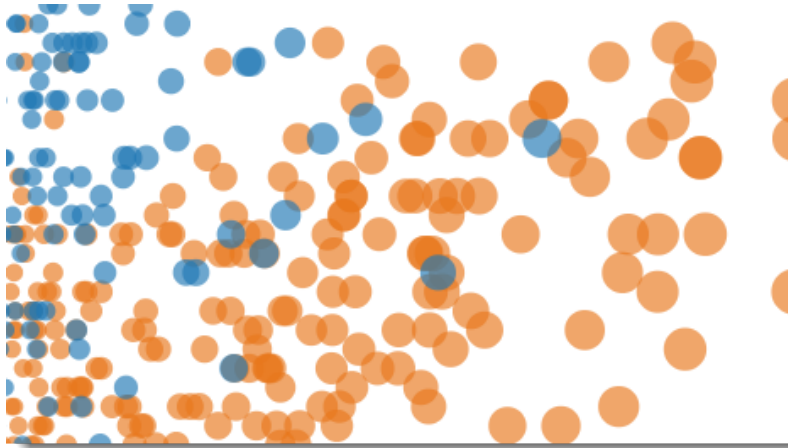


Hits

This is fun and informative with some great outliers to explore.

Misses

I bet you wanted to look up your college / university to see its retention rate.



Where's my school?

I would love to see a search feature that would allow me to highlight (not filter by) a particular institution. Right now I have to work hard to find my school, even with filtering by state and whether the institution is public or private.

In all fairness, using a filter in Tableau to just highlight something is not as straightforward as it should be, but it can be done.

And adding that capability would make the dashboard a lot easier to use.

Conclusion

The common element in both examples is that they both allow you to explore things that are about you; e.g., your name in the first example and your school in the second example. The only problem with the second example is that it takes a lot of work to find your school.

I've written a blog post that discusses how personalization can make your visualizations more compelling. Please see [It's Your Data, Not the Viz, that's Boring](#).