tech talk by angelo fernando

Killer infographic! But does it solve TMI?

Are infographics just a new form of storytelling? Or are they the answer to the problem of "too much information," or TMI, which we communicators have perhaps exacerbated?

If you've been noticing the mad rush to communicate through infographics, you're not alone. They seem to be everywhere—in blog posts, in articles, on websites. What's more, these elements—information or statistics presented visually in a quick, easy-to-digest format—are being forwarded and linked to in stories and tweets in the same way that once made videos go viral.

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Before you roll up your sleeves and tell your story through information or data (or both), sit back and get some perspective from two experts. One is an expert in information architecture. The other is the co-founder of an agency that helps clients turn data into infographics.

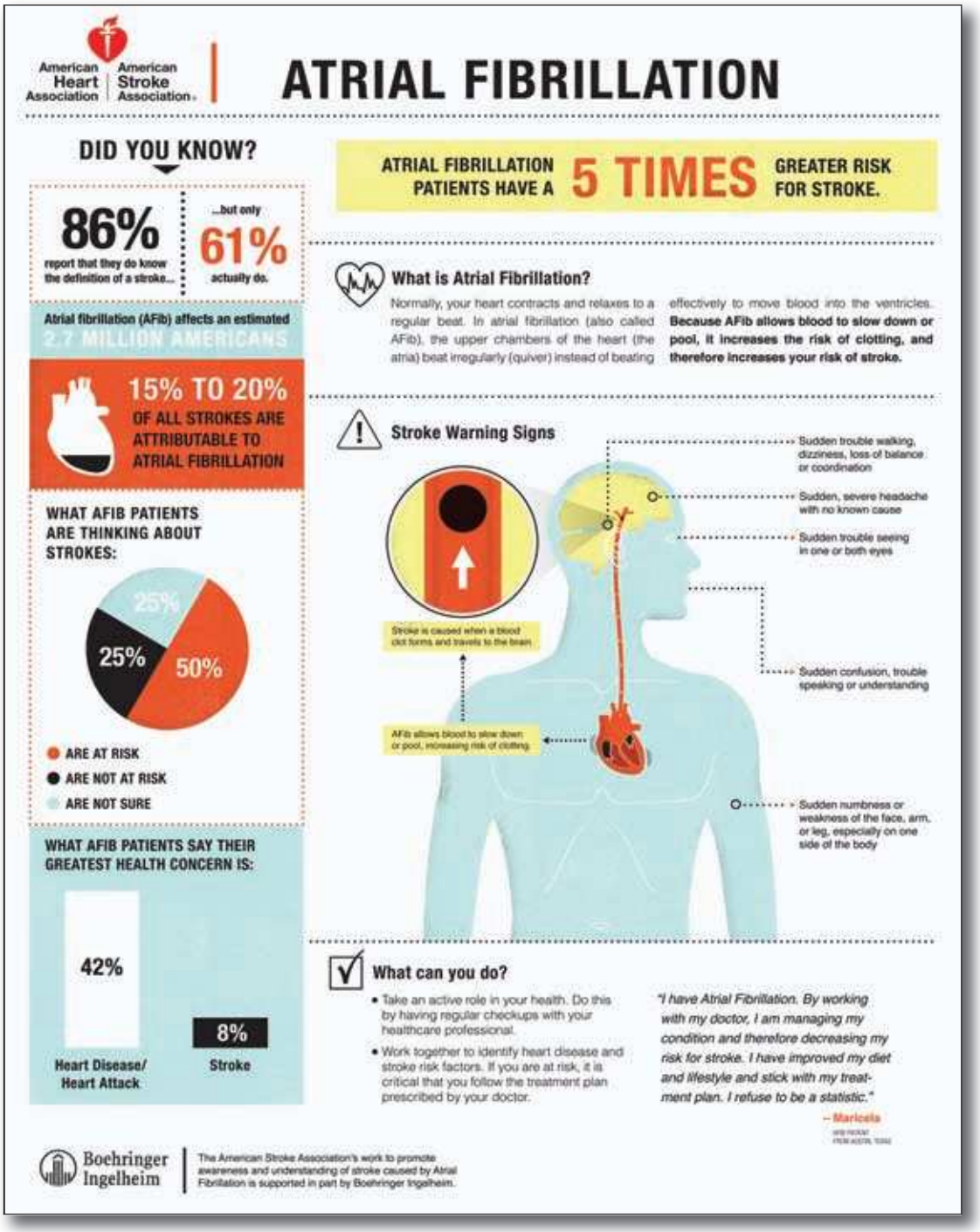
Alberto Cairo, a director for infographics and multimedia at Época-Editora Globo, in São Paulo, describes an *infographic* as a highly edited synthesis of data (a presentation), whereas a *visualization* is a graphic that allows an audience to explore and analyze data and phenomena. He thinks the infographics explosion is largely the result of free and easy tools that let people dabble in graphics, charts and diagrams. These tools—offered through websites like Creately, which allows users to build flowcharts and mind-maps, and Visual.ly, an online community for creators of infographic content—have been "a catalyst to something that has been growing in the past decades. Graphics are seen everywhere—TV, textbooks, the media," he says. Until now, not everybody had the ability to take information and represent it visually. Infographics have been democratized, so to speak.

That doesn't mean that you can throw just anything into a box—the info in an infographic must exceed expectations. Jason Lankow, co-founder and CEO of Column Five Media, a Newport Beach, California, company that creates info-posters and other data-rich graphics, adds that as people begin to curate and share good information on the Web and social media channels become distribution channels, the cream will rise to the top. "That's not to say that shareability is the only measure of a successful or 'good' infographic," he says, "but the wisdom of the crowds is getting more picky as the sheer novelty of infographics wears off."

What's old is new

Don't let the tools and impressive design fool you into thinking infographics are a new thing. Infographics go back a few centuries. Cairo points to statistical charts developed at the end of the 18th century by the Scottish engineer William Playfair, who developed some of the basic representations we use today to depict information, like line charts and pie charts. Or we could reach back further to maps. Think of the painstakingly drawn maps that early navigators and explorers used. Early mapmakers were not so concerned about how the map was designed, but rather sought to convey in a usable format all of the information they had about the world at the time. Think about a map for a second: It's an infographic. Do you really want to know the elevation of the mountains, the precise angle of the curve at the intersection, the height of the adjacent buildings, the number of traffic lights or the number of lanes? Or do you simply want to know the shortest distance between two points? In the digital era we have developed an appetite for the data behind the map (so that we could, in a few taps of a finger, find a railway station's ticket prices or a restaurant's menu using a smartphone's GPS). But the humble map is essentially what we go to the most.

Florence Nightingale reportedly used infographics to communicate with Queen Victoria during the Crimean War. It turns out that this model nurse was also a mathematician and a data geek. She turned her meticulous collection of data—



the heart of the matter

Visual communication firm Column Five Media created this infographic as part of a two-sided educational poster for the American Heart Association, to help doctors educate atrial fibrillation patients about their risk of stroke. The poster succinctly captures a range of information about a complex subject in a way that is easy for patients to take in. It addresses patient concerns, educates them about warning signs of a stroke and provides a call to action to help them better manage their health.

a picture isn't always worth a thousand words

Don't feel compelled to get on the infographic bandwagon with just any old statistics. Think about whether the data or information you have is worthy of such a treatment. Consider:

- Does it add value or interest to the story?
- Does it complicate or confuse the issue?
- Is it complete and well documented?

Extracting information from the main story can be useful, but only if the reader will derive value from it.

specifically mortality rates and causes—at the hospital in Turkey where she worked into charts that she was able to present to the queen, in order to state her case for more resources for nurses. (Nightingale's charts would later be called *roses* or *coxcombs*.)

Anyone can adopt the Florence Nightingale approach to information. Just follow the basic rules. First, size up your audience. Then, present only the salient facts. Let the data tell the story. And finally, don't expect the audience (or the CEO) to have great eyesight.

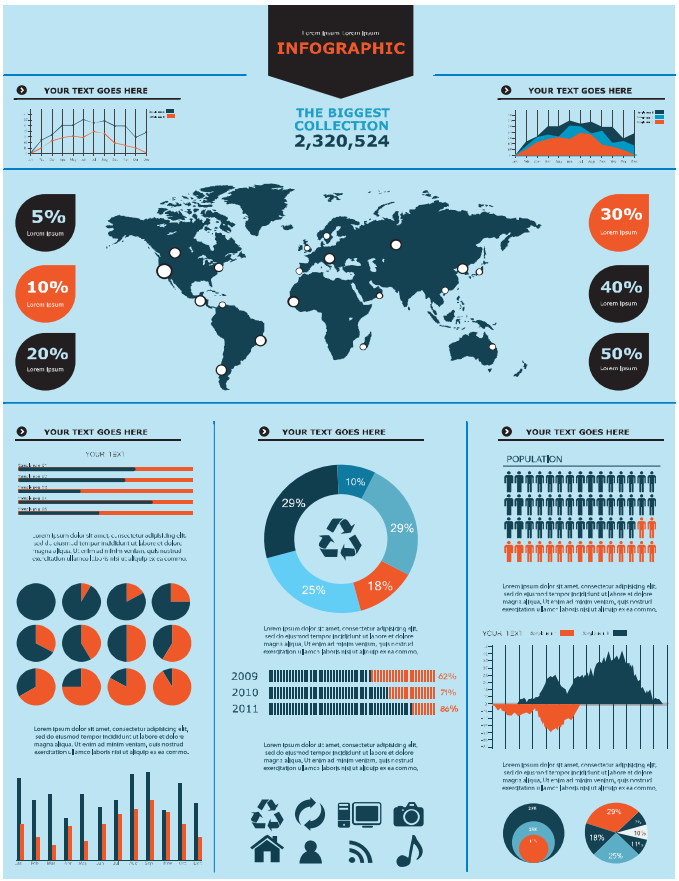
What's more, ask yourself:

1. **Is the data** or information you're presenting trustworthy and verifiable?
2. **Do the callouts** and captions provided add context or detail?
3. **Are any comparisons** made or trends indicated?
4. **Are you pushing** an agenda, motivating a target audience or explaining a complex idea?
5. **Are you going after** a new segment of an existing audience, or are you trying to get through to an audience in a new way?

Just the facts

Not all infographics are equal. A quick scan of a dozen infographics reveals that people who create them are often tempted to cram as much information as possible into the available space. The purpose of an infographic is to distill thought and reduce clutter. Adding to the TMI problem defeats the purpose.

What are some good examples of infographics? Lankow points to airlines' flight safety



cards. While a visual representation of data is also an infographic, "not all information graphics necessarily would be a visualization of data," he says. There are even more examples of how publishers are using interactive data in online infographics.

"Infographics are not just figures with good-looking pictures and drawings," Cairo says. "They should have structure, and they shou allow comparisons and correlations."

A good example of this is how *Wired* assembled a simple infographic that counted the number of tweets from around the world dealing with the death last year of Apple founder Steve Jobs. Using multiple colors to represent the originating countries, the resulting image mirrored the Apple logo.

Cairo notes that nonprofits in particular have benefited from infographics. "There's a growing sense among those organizations, and in the corporate world as well, that the increasing volume of data forces us to develop forms of presenting and analyzing that data adequately," he says. As for guidelines for creating valuable infographics, he recommends these four pillars: "Be true to the facts, don't distort data, don't oversimplify, and allow clarity."

Come to think of it, aren't those very similar to the guidelines for good storytelling? •

about the author

Angelo Fernando is principal of Public Radius, an Arizona-based strategic communication and PR consultancy that helps organizations bridge the gap between traditional and digital media. Read his blog at HoiPolloiReport.com.