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Category: Emergency / Safety
Project: CoronaVirus-Navigator

What was the challenge?

At the beginning of February, during a trip abroad via various airports, I realized that the information about the spread of the corona virus was becoming increasingly threatening. In search of more concrete data, I discovered the LiveTracker of the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at John Hopkins University, USA - developed with the good intention of providing quantitative, geographically located data as an alternative to emotional headlines.

However, after having visualized similar issues before, such as the spread of radioactivity after the catastrophe of 2011/03 in Northern Japan, I immediately understood that the principles chosen for the presentation would rather cause/support misunderstandings. Circles, which by their size should indicate the number of cases, are inevitably read as geographical coverage in the context of the underlying map. This problem becomes more and more acute with increasing numbers and hence larger circles.

The choice of colors - red/black - induces a feeling of ominous threat, which impedes sober communication and understanding.

What was the solution?

CSSE has to be credited for providing daily updated lists of cases, identifying infections, recoveries, and fatalities per country or province apart from their map-based dashboard. This has allowed me to create a constantly updated 3-D view where cases are represented by vertically growing bars, distinguishing the three levels available in the data. On inspection, these elements show detailed information such as location, date of update, and a categorized list of cases. To be fast, I choose GoogleEarth as platform. Since I soon found out that most people cannot see this format, a second version followed, which made the interactive earth view available for standard browsers - also on mobile devices. Later, the snapshot of the current status has been updated to include a time-slider allowing to browse past data to the present

What was the effect?

When I saw the 3-D presentation for the first time, my understanding of this crisis changed radically. The place where the virus was first identified had an incomparably higher number of cases than any other place nearby. All affected places were gathered in a small part of China, which clearly shows the need to provide data by identifiable significant agglomerations/communities - and not by arbitrary political entities - such as provinces or countries. Nevertheless - even today, the spread is still communicated mainly on a country-by-country basis, which emphasizes the sense of US against THEM and reinforces the urge to build walls and barriers while a coming together and joining of forces across borders is really needed.