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Designing Credible News: Data Story Representation in Short-Form Content

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Abstract

The rise of short-form video on social media platforms is one of the most recent disruptions in our information environment, especially as it relates to news media and the role of the infographic. This article examines how the form news takes on these platforms takes after televised news and may contribute to declining trust in media institutions. Using McLuhan's theory of media temperature, it contrasts this with the evolution of designed print data journalism and news interactives as a form that builds trust with audiences. Finally, it surveys whether and how 37 Sigma Award-winning articles were represented on the most popular short-form media platforms, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube.

Keywords: data journalism, communication design, infographics, media ecology, media temperature, short-form video, trust in media

Introduction

In 2025, American trust in media declined for the seventh year to a record low of 28% (Gallup, 2025). Similar trends have been observed over the past decade in European countries such as the U.K. and Germany (Newman *et al.*, 2025). Historically, data journalism and the use of infographics in news design have helped establish the credibility of news outlets (Du, Zhu and Cheng, 2019; Morgenstern *et al.*, 2025). Given how drastically media environments have changed in recent years, it is worth asking how the norms and affordances within them impact the design and form of news, and how this contributes to credibility. This article examines how form has diverged in the digital era, with data stories and news interactives taking after print

while short-form media follows the visual language of televised news. It identifies how trust may be strengthened through data journalism and surveys how these stories are currently represented in short-form media environments.

Television's Impact on the Infographic in News Design

Visualizing information has been an important feature of the news media environment since reporting was professionalized. By the time "journalism" was coined as a term in the nineteenth century, European news had already become visual through the use of infographics by the likes of Joseph Priestley and William Playfair nearly a century earlier (Dick, 2020). The news infographic's importance grew tremendously during the second half of the 20th century as publications began seriously competing against television for audiences by using newly professionalized graphic designers, then again in the 2000s when reading habits changed as readers migrated online from print (Usher, 2016; Dick, 2020). Both turns are worth examining and can help us understand how the form and consumption of data stories have shifted, and why it matters.

The rise of televised news in post-war America directly contributed to declining readership and increased competition between traditional news outlets. Scholars of news infographics focus almost exclusively on their use in print, suggesting that while print publications were finding new value in their use, broadcast news did not use them as frequently (Franchi, 2013; Dick, 2020). Despite general audience preference for televised news over print, research shows audiences are more likely to miscomprehend televised stories compared to those in print, and in matters of public interest such as political coverage, televised stories are much more likely to present subjective information and less likely to cover policy (Jacoby and Hoyer, 1983; Wormald, 2000).

The downsides of televised news lie in McLuhan's famous adage that "the medium is the message" as well as his ideas on the inverse correlation between media temperature and audience participation (McLuhan, 1964). Television is primarily a vehicle for entertainment, influencing the coverage choices of networks and the intent audiences bring to it (Dahlgren and Griffin, 2011). The blurring of these lines, alongside a growing number of media outlets during technological change, is one factor that has contributed to declining trust in the media as an institution (Holcomb, 2024). Whether audiences are there to be entertained or to become better informed impacts whether they engage with information in an active or passive way. Neil Postman describes the problem with this disposition with his critique of the phrase "now… this", which he says, "is commonly used on radio and television newscasts to indicate that what one has just heard or seen has no relevance to what one is about to hear or see, or possibly to anything one is ever likely to hear or see" (Postman, 2014, p. 109). While McLuhan labeled television of the 1960s as a cool medium compared to film, televised news, rich with photorealistic audio and visual stimuli, is quite hot compared to the poor-quality print and abstract written word of the newspaper. Consumption on the part of the viewer is therefore passive, reducing the cognitive effort put towards criticism and contextualization. Its very domestication is what dulls audience analysis of its form.

The form of televised news also must adhere to strict time schedules; thus the length of stories is subservient to the format rather than news segments expanding or contracting to best suit the information. The visual language over time has remained largely the same—a professionally dressed news anchor directly addressing the camera, or mediating for the viewer with an interviewee either in the studio, another recording location, or in the field (Carter and

Allan, 2009; Dahlgren and Griffin, 2011). Depending on the story, these talking head shots may be cut together with often repetitive footage of, or related to, the story subject. Although simple infographics are sometimes used, such as maps, line, or bar charts, the medium itself pressures programs to select stories with a strong visual emphasis rather than content worthy of public discourse or which may require more active analysis, such as data stories. This imagery also places a focus on the anchor as a personality.

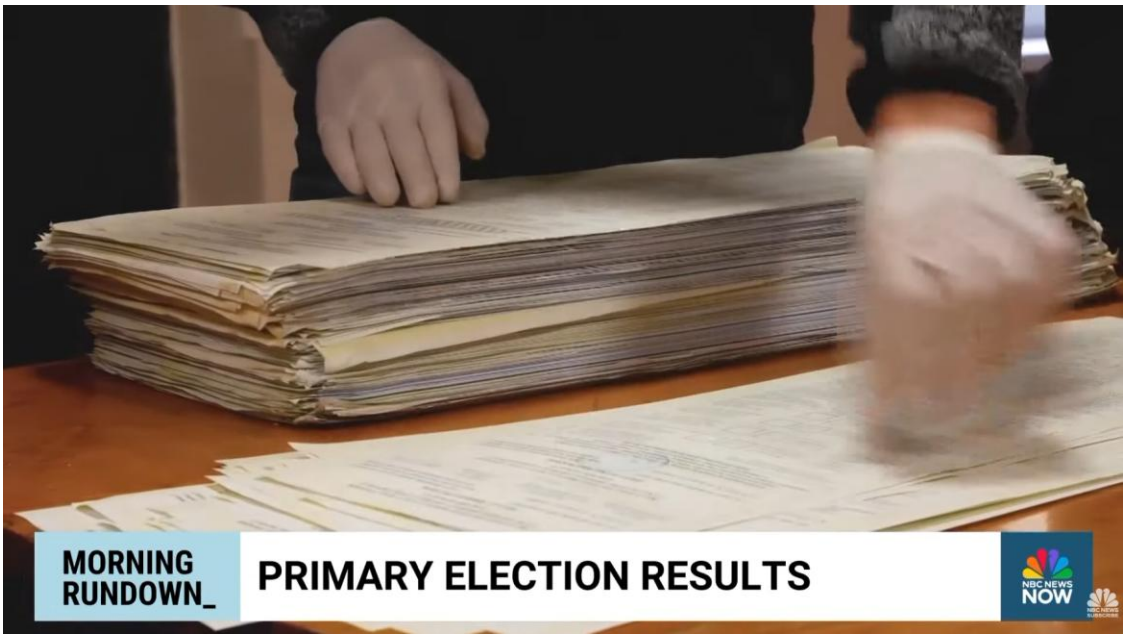


Figure 1. Anchor narration over footage of subject matter—either part of a program package or stock (LIVE: NBC News NOW - June 17, 2026).



Figure 2. Televised infographics commonly display maps depicting weather forecasts or simple figures of financial performance (LIVE: NBC News NOW - June 17, 2026).



Figure 3. Reporter in professional dress delivers beat headlines in objective cadence (LIVE: NBC News NOW - June 17, 2026).



Figure 4. Anchors in studio mediates discussion of multiple headlines and speaks directly to the viewer (LIVE: NBC News NOW - June 17, 2026).

The Data Story

The proliferation of computing significantly changed the role of the infographic in the news, giving rise to the data story and data journalism, which is closely linked to interactive journalism, as both a method of practice and presentation (Usher, 2016). In an increasingly complex and measured world, the ability to parse data and communicate it becomes a necessary

skill to carry out journalism's mission of keeping the public informed and holding power to account, since the stories themselves are contained in the numbers (Jurkowitz and Mitchell, 2020; Davis, 2021). The growth of data journalism and news interactives brings benefits for the reader as well as an opportunity to repair trust and credibility in media institutions.

To discuss data stories with more specificity, Hao et al. have suggested five types of data-driven news articles by coding samples by data source, analysis depth, contextual detail, investigation depth, and article discussion (Hao *et al.*, 2024).

1. **Quick Updates:** A snapshot of current data featuring a visualization and limited text. Sometimes these appear as dashboards.

2. **Briefings:** A concise summary and overview of events. The differentiator from Quick Updates is that visualizations are supplemental rather than the primary content.

3. **Chart Descriptions:** These are stories that are enriched by data. These articles typically make predictions or take a multifaceted view of a topic.

4. **Investigations:** Use a range of data sources to develop content. Sections build on each other and data often reveals patterns or trends not otherwise visible.

5. **In-depth Investigations:** These are similar to Investigations, but involve extensive research and sophisticated visualization techniques often alongside statistical testing. These stories often challenge conventional wisdom or investigate anomalies in data sources to reveal surprising discoveries, fostering critical discussion and thought.

Audience Engagement

According to major publications and media researchers, data stories help journalists tell clearer, more compelling stories by making them more engaging and entertaining, an increasingly common expectation from readers (Sam, 2018; Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey and López-García, 2022; Tjärnhage et al., 2023). In contrast to televised news, data stories and their associated figures are quite cool whether read in print or on the web. The data itself is an abstraction—often a measurement or aggregation of the true subject matter. Even the most common figures such as maps, line, or bar charts require the viewer to understand and translate a symbol language, often including size, shape, and color, to make meaning of the message.

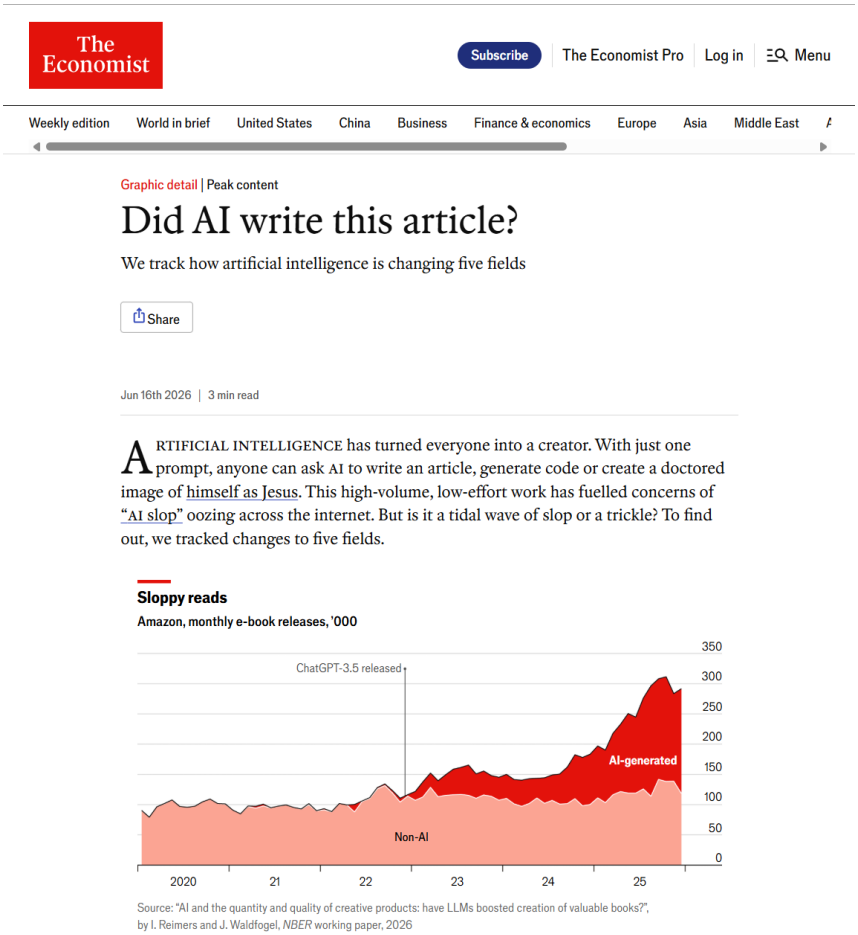


Figure 5. Lede and opening of The Economist's "Graphic Detail" story from June 16, 2026 (The Economist, 2026).

In charts, this occurs quickly and can be more efficient in communication than language alone, though it still requires active audience participation (Franchi, 2013; Franconeri *et al.*, 2021; Hamza, 2023). Often when designing data visualizations for editorial purposes, designers will intentionally choose a bespoke or less standard visualization with the explicit purpose of encouraging active audience engagement, hoping to both capture attention and intrigue the reader enough to decode the graphic (Franchi, 2013; Schwabish, 2021).

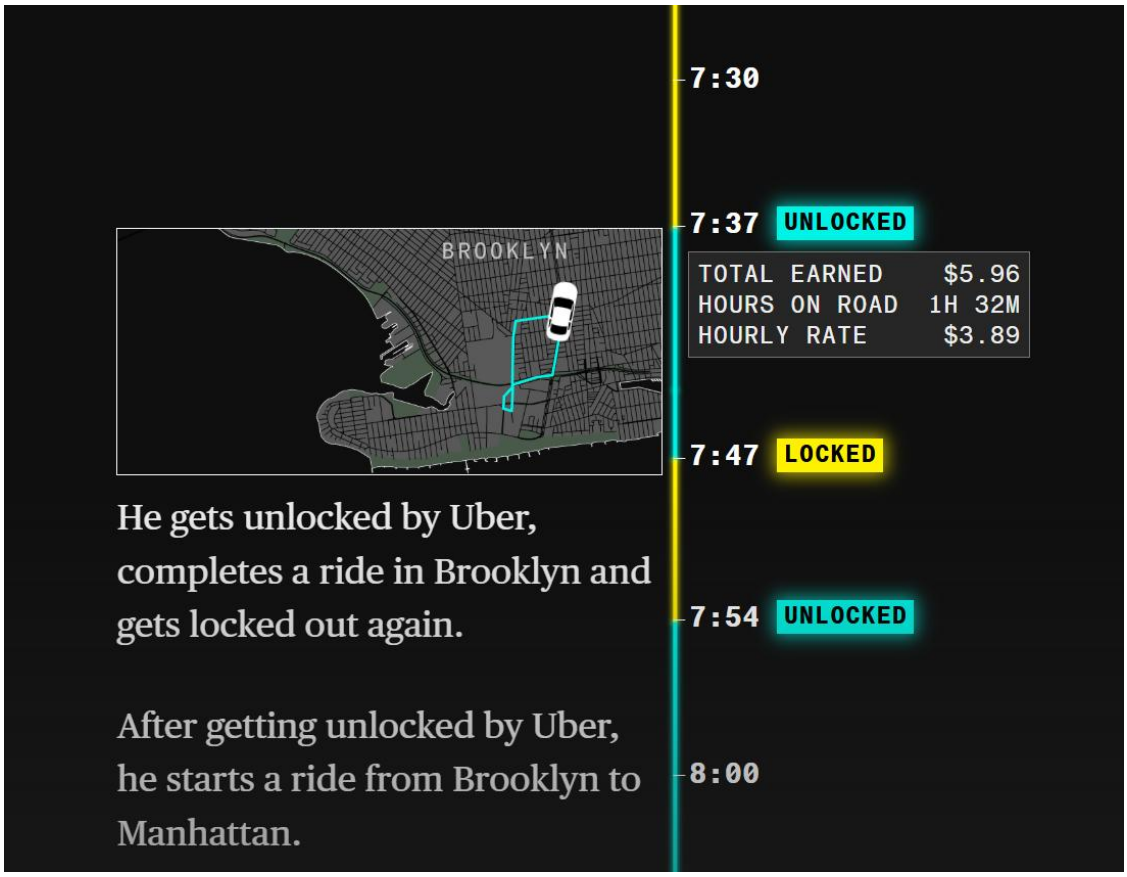


Figure 6. Bloomburg combines interactive scrollytelling, animated maps, annotated timelines, calendars, and tables in "How Uber and Lyft Used a Loophole to Deny NYC Drivers Millions in Pay" (Bloomberg.com, 2024).

The shift to digital-first publication models has allowed outlets to reconsider how news stories are told and facts are presented. Explanatory data and charts no longer need to be presented as static graphics, but can unfold over time through "scrollytelling", a method of guiding a reader through a narrative that places equal if not more importance on the visual support of a story compared to the text. In exploratory data stories, journalists can offer interactivity through web applications that expose the data that is most relevant to the reader. For example, in "How Has Gun Violence Changed in Your Neighborhood?" by The New York Times, the interactive follows data interaction best practices such as "overview first, zoom and filter, then details-on-demand" (Shneiderman, 1996; Murray *et al.*, 2024).

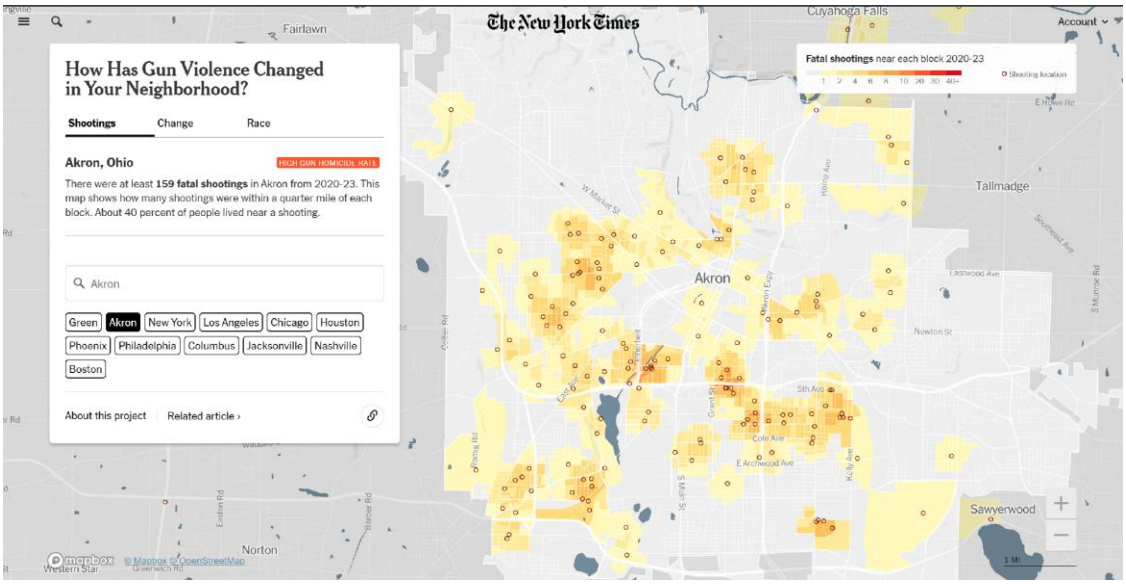


Figure 7. "How Has Gun Violence Changed in Your Neighborhood?" provides readers with access to data overview, zoom and filter, and details-on-demand (Murray et al., 2024).

Building Credibility

Maintaining credibility is essential for journalists to carry out their mission, but there is debate on how exactly credibility should be defined and measured. Regarding news credibility specifically, Meyer (1988) summarized five key variables which contribute to audience perception: believability, accuracy, trustworthiness, bias, and completeness (Meyer, 1988). Visualizations in data stories contribute to credibility in several ways.

By designing multiple versions of the same data story using text only, text and plain data such as numbers and tables, and text plus data visualization, Du, Zhu, and Cheng (2019) discovered that data must be included in visualizations to improve credibility ratings among readers (Du, Zhu and Cheng, 2019). Readers also found the stories with visualizations easier to understand (believability), appreciated them more, and perceived the data itself to be more credible.

In a 2025 study, it was found that readers presume who the author is and whether they agree with or are receptive to their information based on formal features of data visualization, not just the content (Morgenstern *et al.*, 2025). In other words, readers are immediately evaluating source trustworthiness based on data visualization design decisions, and what may reinforce credibility with one reader might discredit the information for another. Thus, while visualizations can often reinforce credibility, it is not possible to create universal one-size-fits-all guidelines for how to do so, and it is important for designers to understand their audience before creating graphics.

Though not specific to stories with visualizations, transparency is also amplified in many data stories as exemplified by outlets such as The Guardian, The Washington Post, and The Markup, which share their source datasets and analysis methods (Elew and Sankin, 2024; Duncan and Hernandes, 2025; *The Washington Post*, 2026). This sharing proactively acknowledges that journalism is not a one-way communication from reporter to audience. The opening of source materials invites the public to continue the discourse by verifying or challenging the interpretation presented. This affordance can be strengthened when

communicating with the author requires little effort, such as by commenting on a publication platform or replying directly to a social media post.

These features suggest that the inclusion and form of visualizations both contribute to the perception of news credibility. It also means that figures and charts cannot be abandoned if outlets are to reap the benefits of data reporting as a method of news production.

The Rise of Short-Form News

The average length of most forms of media has continued to shrink over time, reinforcing and responding to decreasing attention spans (Mark, 2023; Yan *et al.*, 2024). Use of mobile devices for consumption has meant attention to content is often compressed to brief windows between other tasks or split between them as viewers attempt to multitask. This behavior is sometimes called "snacking" on content, referring to bite-sized forms of media. Snackable content and the growth of social media have created the circumstances for short-form video to thrive on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, where Americans are more regularly consuming news compared to traditional outlets (Pew Research Center, 2025; Tomasik and Matsa, 2025). Young people in particular view news not only to stay informed, but also because they expect it to provide some level of entertainment (Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey and López-García, 2022).

Given the expectation of entertainment, condensed format, ephemeral nature of posts, and focus on user-generated mobile content, it is unsurprising then that the visual language of news on short-form platforms is an evolution of televised news instead of other perhaps more effective formats. Three existing approaches to short-form news content have been identified: the creator-first approach, where promotion or stories are tacked onto existing trends or memes; the newsroom-led strategy, where TV content is repurposed; and the news explainer format (Tran, 2025). All three formats focus on personalities speaking directly to the camera, the content creator being the new stand-in for the news anchor. Often, the emphasis on entertainment is made more explicit than it is on television. In many cases of the creator-first approach and the news explainer, the content creator takes on the role of a sketch comic, roleplaying multiple perspectives in a dialogue, sometimes standing in for assumed audience responses, a common format of short-form content.

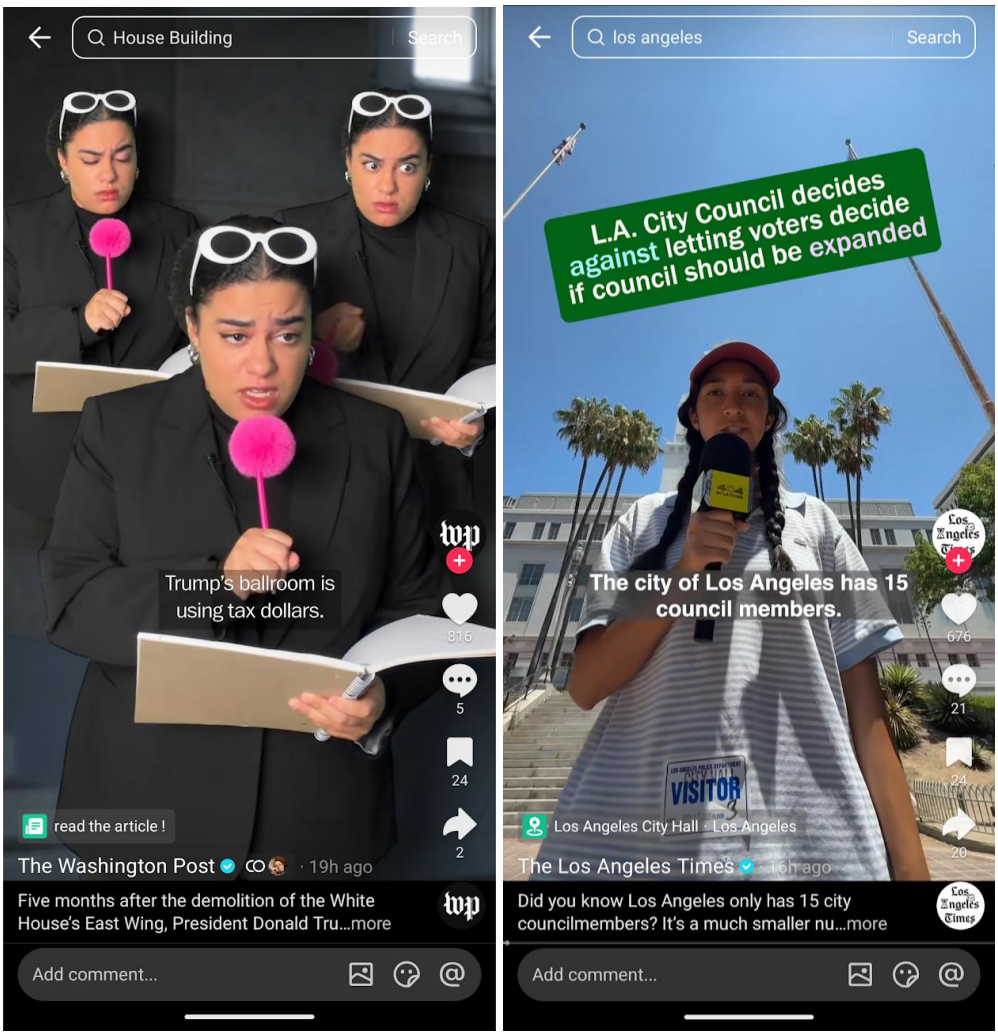


Figure 8. Examples of common news formats in short-form media (LA Times, 2026; Washington Post, 2026).

For these reasons, short-form news content is cooler than televised news but is much hotter than an interactive or static data story relying on data visualization. By exaggerating the qualities of televised news, social media may further harm journalism's credibility as an institution.

Data Stories on Short-Form Platforms: Sigma Awards Media Review

One response to the declining reputation may be to promote journalism formats proven to increase the perception of credibility on these platforms, such as data stories. To understand how experts are adapting data stories to short-form media, a review was conducted of the social media accounts of outlets publishing high-quality data journalism.

Methodology

All stories recognized by the 2023–2026 Sigma Awards were collected to create the initial dataset of 40 stories for this study. The Sigma Awards were used to curate the dataset

because the competition is internationally recognized, peer-reviewed data journalism competition that reviews stories from both large and small newsrooms. Although the awards were created in 2019, only the winners of 2023–2026 were made available for review, which is why these years were selected for this study. This ensured high-quality stories were used as samples, and it was assumed that stories of this quality would be more likely to be promoted on social media channels, increasing the sample size of short-form adaptations to review.

All articles from the initial dataset were reviewed for data visualization content. Three articles without any charts or data visualization present were removed from analysis, leaving a total sample of 37 articles. Posts to TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube were manually reviewed in the month following each article's original publication date to ensure the content could still be considered current news (Eddy *et al.*, 2025). For Instagram and YouTube, the study analyzed only content posted to Instagram Reels or YouTube Shorts to maintain a focus on short-form content, as these formats specifically encourage short, vertical video posts. Posts referencing the Sigma stories were downloaded and catalogued for review, resulting in a sample of 23 videos across the three platforms. Several stories were promoted through multiple posts.

After the videos were downloaded, they were viewed to identify similar patterns in visual presentation. Inductive coding was used to create categories for each recognized pattern. Through iteration, similar categories were combined, resulting in the codes and paired definitions below. Finally, all posts were analyzed for instances of the codes. Any posts which contained at least one instance of a code were counted in Table 2 and Figure 10.

- **Length:** Duration of video post.
- **Chart length:** The total time charts or infographics are visible in the post.
- **Narration:** Whether the post includes audio narration, text captions, both, or neither.
- **Visual Support:** Types of visuals which make up the post including:
    - **B-roll:** Video of the post subject matter included to provide surrounding context or for aesthetic purposes.
    - **Chart (full):** Contains at least one instance where a chart is the focus of the frame when shown. Information is meant to be decoded and is fully readable. These may include infographics, standard charts such as bar or line charts, or bespoke data visualizations.
    - **Chart (illegible):** Contains at least one instance of a chart that is not possible to decode. Axes or data points may be too small to read or only part of the chart may be shown in the frame for aesthetic purposes.
    - **Illustration:** Illustration, stylized photos, or graphic compositions included for aesthetic purposes.
    - **Linker:** Call to action at the end of the video pointing viewers to find more information (Sallam *et al.*, 2025). This may be a direct link to the full story or a brandmark closing out the video.

- **Slideshow:** Still graphics or images with text stitched together into a video format.
- **Talking head:** Video of narrator or interviewee speaking to the camera or to an interviewer directly off-camera.
- **Website:** Screen recording of the website version of the story being discussed.
- **Photo:** Still photography, sometimes with a subtle pan or zoom framing applied.



Figure 9. Examples of Chart-full (left) and Chart-illegible (right) (The New York Times, 2026; Data Cívica, 2025).

Limitations

One limitation of this sampling method is that because the awards reward in-depth investigations, it does not adequately capture all types of data stories researchers have identified (such as Quick Updates or Chart Descriptions per the Hao *et al.* classification system) (Hao *et al.*, 2024). A second limitation is that the international nature of the samples collected and the strategies employed by these publications may not accurately reflect the behaviors of Western media outlets, which much of the secondary literature in this article focuses on. The author does

not argue such inferences can be made, and the sampling method used primarily ensures that a diverse range of high-quality data stories are gathered for study.

Results

The results of the review are as follows.

Table 1. Overview of Posts Collected.

Platform	Posts	Unique Stories Promoted	Of Sampled Stories Promoted, Percent on Platform
Instagram Reels	16	12	85.7%
TikTok	5	5	35.7%
YouTube Shorts	2	2	14.3%
Total	**23**	**14**	

Instagram was by far the most popular platform through which stories were promoted. While TikTok does not yet have the same rate of adoption as Instagram, one in five Americans now say they regularly get news there, as do 55% of the platform's users compared to 41% of Instagram users, suggesting it may be a more receptive audience (Tomasik and Matsa, 2025; Pew Research Center, 2025).

Table 2. Sigma Award Media Review Summary.

Year	Articles with Charts	Adapted to Short-Form Content	Short-Form Content Included Chart-Full
2023	9	2	2
2024	10	1	1
2025	9	5	2
2026	9	6	4
Total	**37**	**14**	**9**
Percent	**100%**	**37.8%**	**24.3%**

Instead of providing many examples to learn from, what this initial review shows is that outlets are struggling to fit data stories into their existing short-form media strategies when even award-winning stories are not being adapted for the platforms. Fourteen of the 37 articles with charts were shared on social media, but only one quarter of all 37 were promoted using charts meant to convey information, even though their use is important for building credibility.

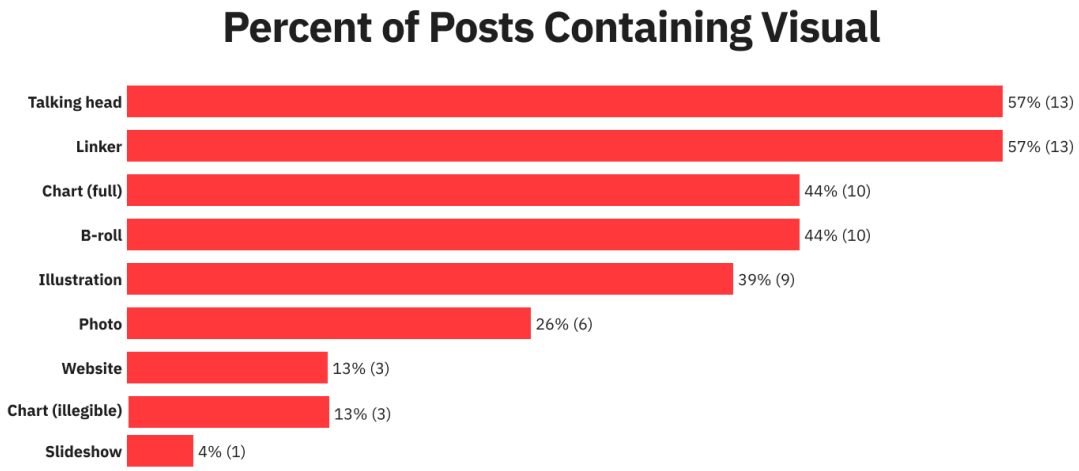


Figure 10. Percent of Posts Containing Each Visual Type.

Use of visual support across posts was diverse. Charts were included in 44% of posts, but the most common visual elements were linkers and talking-head shots. Much of the visual language falls into the news-explainer format category, leaning on a journalist or content creator speaking directly to the camera, with cuts to photos or topic video footage.

The most successful inclusions of charts leveraged the affordance of showing change over time within graphics, animating line charts, adding annotations to maps, or highlighting specific points as they are discussed in narration. These tactics follow best practices of data animation, ensuring that change adds to the meaning-making process (Fisher, 2010; Schwabish, 2019).

Conclusion

As our media environment changes with the rise of social news and short-form media, it is important to consider how these changes impact the form of news, and consequently the perception of news credibility. Data stories may offer an alternative form news can take in short-form media, but outlets are currently struggling to adapt them while leaving their charts intact, which previous literature shows are important for the perception of credibility (Du, Zhu and Cheng, 2019). This review shows the need for additional research to be done to understand why data stories may be shown less often on platforms.

Part of the reason may be the inherent mismatch in media temperature, where charts and infographics are cooler and require active audience interpretation while social media encourages passive consumption and high visual stimulus. Another reason may be that data stories require more effort to convert to a video form. Static graphics need adapted by designers to include meaningful animation to suit the format. Interactive data stories often build their graphics using code and are more difficult to recreate in editing software. Practitioner interviews with data journalists and social content teams, alongside additional media reviews sampling larger, well-staffed outlets may provide fertile ground for further investigation.

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