

# How information murals can improve public policy discussions

For individuals in the **policy analysis and development process**, info-murals:

- highlight logical and visual patterns of emerging challenges, arguments, viewpoints, scenarios, trends, options
- keep the big picture from being obscured by details.
- enable assumptions, gaps, and limits to be discovered
- classify, aggregate, and synthesize thought chunks, and
- facilitate creative responses to larger and more complex patterns and thought sequences

For **committee and task force meetings**, info-murals:

- enhance codification and synthesis of common mental models for the whole group
- move subsequent meetings along more rapidly, deeply, and smoothly
- permit seeing progress from simple skeletons of ideas to viewing full blown synthesis
- enable absent participants to catch up quickly
- increase the chance of participants talking to, not past each other
- keep participants working on issues while separated by geographical distance
- facilitate more rapid cross-disciplinary discussion of highly complex socio-technical issues; and
- help structure the flow of complex discussions
- often substitute for the writing of a long report

For **decision makers**, info-murals:

- increase an appreciation for issue complexity without obscuring decisive issues and options
- facilitate a broader and deeper study of complex issues; and
- engage wider stakeholder groups with visually appealing, colorful displays that incorporate
- incorporate powerful, generative metaphors and images that trigger creativity
- communicate implications and conclusions of strategies and plans to their organizations

Visual analytics also can **help strategic planners** when:

- experts talk past each other.
- a subfield heats up and the job is to sort this out for potential funding of a fast-breaking field accelerate.
- competing priorities make funding decisions difficult and tough decision between applicants need to be made.
- new research questions surface and show that there is a need for adjacent fields to become involved and different language, points of view, philosophies and approaches need to be integrated
- fast-breaking subfields require clarification and tracking especially when there are large numbers of researchers working and the shape of conclusions about the field is rapidly changing.
- it is necessary to clarify competing evidentiary claims and there is a need for a method to bring researchers together to examine and clarify these competing results; and
- when it is important to sort out emerging technologies and overlaps, breakthroughs, and areas that have been ignored.

Our substantial experience developing and using visual analytics shows that visual methods have substantially affected public policy analysis, formulation, and implementation in four principal ways:

- (1) rendering concepts and relationships visually often **reveals that vital data has been overlooked, inadequately correlated, or never collected in the first place;**
- (2) large displays (even mural-size displays) enable problem solvers to see both the detail and the big picture simultaneously, thereby **improving the evaluation of policy implications, consequences, and tradeoffs;**
- (3) diverse groups, including remote groups, have been able to reach a working consensus faster using visual analytics to record meetings rather than traditional text-based minutes. This has also aided international working because visual language is often more effective than text in at least calling attention to, if not **helping to resolve, cross-language ambiguities.**
- (4) visual representation of group processes and thinking regarding complex issues **enables larger ideas (bigger thoughts) to be shared relatively easily** with others outside the group, e.g., with other issue stakeholders. Together with structured group processes, visualizations can be a powerful option identification, negotiation and consensus building tool.
- (5) because all of our strategic info-murals are composed of hundreds of discrete chunks of text and visuals, they may be **modified for individual organizations, easily updated, and readily used in a variety of media**, from PowerPoint presentations to inserts in reports.

**MacroVU® Analytics**

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