

Coronavirus pandemic: What dashboards do not show

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How can the course of the corona pandemic and its effects be illustrated? In recent months, dashboards—interactive, graphically depicted online summaries—have become the new norm of displaying

infection rates, deaths and patterns of spread. This is problematic, as geographer Professor Jonathan Everts at Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg (MLU) writes in a commentary for the journal *Dialogues in Human Geography*. He criticizes the way the programs are handled and explains which aspects of the pandemic they are not taking into account.

Dashboards are computer programs that compile various data, information and statistics about a topic and graphically present them as concisely as possible. These can be simple figures, diagrams or enriched maps. During the corona [pandemic](#), the "COVID-19 Map", produced by Johns-Hopkins University in the U.S., has been held up as the standard. "A [dashboard](#) always suggests that you are getting a summary of all the important data," says Jonathan Everts. The data are updated in almost real time and can be viewed by everyone. This is problematic, explains Everts, because these tools are no longer only being used by [health authorities](#), but instead by many people around the world.

Everts says that dashboards often lack a clear explanation, either precise or in general, as to how these figures are compiled. "These values are actually way too complex to be used like this. This leads to overly simplified explanations for very complex phenomena," he criticizes.

One example of this is mortality rates, which can vary dramatically from region to region. "These differences cannot be explained solely by the health and prevention measures taken locally. However, dashboards suggest that they can be depicted geographically," says Everts. In order to understand the causes better, there needs to be a differentiation of regional and demographic features, but this usually is not done in dashboards. For example, they do not provide any information about the [social groups](#) and places where the virus is spreading particularly fast at a local level. However, this information is necessary if appropriate measures to contain the virus are to be taken, says Everts.

Focusing on individual indicators, such as declining case numbers, could quickly create the false impression that the crisis will soon be over. Another possible side effect could be, that the potential long-term negative effects of the pandemic and the measures taken to control them might go unnoticed: "There is major concern for countries that now face problems in the future as a result of the pandemic. These include countries in Africa, where vaccination campaigns have been interrupted for long periods due to curfews and social distancing. This will create serious problems in the coming years," says Everts. The fact that people might miss routine appointments with physicians out of fear of contracting the new [coronavirus](#) could also lead to problems in the medium term, for example high blood pressure or heart attacks might be diagnosed too late. Thus, says Everts, social inequalities remain hidden, which could be further aggravated—or even introduced—by the pandemic.

The human geographer, who also did research on the H1N1 swine flu pandemic of 2009-2010, advocates for a more differentiated and cautious approach to indicators and dashboards in general. "There are two parts to every pandemic crisis: One is the spread of the pathogen around the world, the other is the way society deals with it," he says. There also needs to be a critical, balanced examination of the old problems as well as the new problems created by the pandemic.

More information: Jonathan Everts, The dashboard pandemic, *Dialogues in Human Geography* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/2043820620935355](https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820620935355)

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