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New Research Challenges the “One-Size-Fits-All” Presentation of Digital Information

COLLEGE PARK, Md. — A new book by University of Maryland professor Ronald Yaros argues that the challenges facing journalism, education, public communication, and online information are not only misinformation or shrinking audiences and engagement time. It is also that “one-size-fits-all” linear information is still designed for a single type of user who has the time to consume it.

In *The Digital Engagement Model: How to Capture and Keep Audience Attention*, Yaros introduces a new framework for understanding how people engage with digital information and why traditional linear formats no longer align with today’s audiences.

The model is based on two principles. First, audiences differ in demographics, interests, distracting environments, and available time. Second, information—even information that one would not seek or select—is more likely to generate interest when it is scannable, personalized, interactive, curiosity-driven, and emotionally relevant. Taken together, digital content production can increase engagement.

Combined, these factors create what Yaros calls “attention momentum” — the process by which initial attention is sustained long enough to enable meaningful engagement and learning.

The book also introduces the *Smart Story Suite*, an adaptive information system that humans or artificial intelligence can use not to produce or summarize content but to restructure it into multiple pathways that align with the audience’s need for either short- or long-form consumption.

In studies with more than 1,400 participants, audiences rated the new adaptive structure as more personalized, interactive, and interesting than the same content presented as a traditional linear page of text. Interestingly, participants exposed to the adaptive format also recalled more information than those exposed to the linear story, even though they spent less time on the adaptive format.

“The web transformed how information is distributed, but not how it is structured,” said Yaros. “Content is still designed only for readers, not for the scanners, skimmers, and seekers who make up modern audiences,” said Yaros. “Our research suggests that when information adapts to audience interests and available time, it remains informative whether someone engages for a few seconds or several minutes.”

The *Digital Engagement Model* draws on journalism, communication, cognitive psychology, information science, and human-computer interaction to offer a new framework for designing information – especially news - in an increasingly AI-mediated world.

For more information, visit www.digitalengagementlab.org.

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