Decision Processes Colloquia

Monday, April 20, 2026

Where: JMHH 360

When: 12:00 – 1:20 pm

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Selective (In)Attention: Evidence from Healthcare

ABSTRACT:

Attention is a scarce cognitive resource, and directing it toward consequential decisions is a central challenge in today's information-saturated environments. This challenge is critical in healthcare, where attending to health information can have life-saving implications yet patients are easily overwhelmed by competing messages. Drawing on research suggesting that people direct attention toward issues with higher expected value, we test whether messages designed to raise the perceived value of attending to health information increase patient engagement. Across three pre-registered RCTs in the context of preventive screenings, we find that despite being widely used by healthcare systems and expected by healthcare professionals to work, such messages actually decrease patient engagement with potentially life-saving health information. Analyses of field data and companion online studies suggest that these messages inadvertently direct attention to the possibility of receiving unwanted news, such that interventions aimed at making information harder to ignore may, paradoxically, make it more tempting to avoid.

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