

# Despite surprise, interactive content still shines in study

September 20 2016, by Jim Steele

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Even though a study on the persuasive power of different types of media by a University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH) assistant professor of English had a surprising result in the interactive age, interactive content still proved its power of persuasion.

Dr. Ryan Weber and co-researchers Semih Dinc, a UAH computer science graduate student, and Matthew Williams, a UAH English graduate student, studied how the use of different media to present information on NASA's James Webb Telescope project would affect levels of support for the project and for NASA in general.

They had hypothesized that [interactive media](#) would test better in generating overall support. Instead, they found that using either traditional illustrated color text or interactive programming increased test subjects' support for NASA's James Webb Telescope project by about the same amount, a solid 36 percent.

While most of the uncertain participants changed their minds or support the project, those who had initially said they did not support NASA were not persuaded.

"All these texts did an extremely good job of turning people who were uncertain into being supporters of the project. There is just a greater likelihood that uncertain people will change their support to a yes, while there is a very low likelihood that people who initially said no would change their mind to yes or even to uncertain," says Dr. Weber.

"One reason I wanted to look at NASA for this study is that they are very, very good at social media," he says. "One of the takeaways from this research is that all of these materials are doing a very good job of heightening awareness and increasing how receptive people are to the message."

Interactive media did have a statistical edge in increasing the level of project support when participants were asked later to rank their level of support numerically from 1 to 7 Dr. Weber says.

"The support rankings showed a statistically significant increase," he says. "The other place interactive texts did better was that people ranked their quality better. NASA's Interactive Fly-by Tour simulator was especially effective in changing their mind."

Yet increased support generated in the study for the Webb telescope project didn't have coattails.

"What we found was that these interventions did not change people's minds about whether the federal government should fund space science and exploration projects. Those answers were largely unchanged pre and post intervention," Dr. Weber says. "The dramatic level of increases in support for this project did not translate into more people supporting federal funding for NASA."

The study focused on three participant groups. The control group received a brief text description of the telescope. A second group viewed an eight-page color Portable Document Format (PDF) [file](#) about the project. The third group viewed a four-minute YouTube video with an interactive flyby simulator.

"The YouTube video and flyby simulator give users a level of control and provide information through more sensory channels," say Dr.

Weber.

The 660 study participants in the Qualtrics test were asked before and after viewing the materials whether they supported, were uncertain or did not support NASA's James Webb Telescope project. They were asked to rank the level of their support and to assign on a sliding scale a percentage of NASA's budget to the telescope. Participants were asked whether they support federal funding for NASA, and were then provided with a link to more information or to sign a petition. Researchers tracked the number who signed.

**More information:** R. Weber et al. Americans Support for NASAs James Webb Space Telescope: Effects of Traditional Texts Compared to Interactive Media, *Science Communication* (2016). [DOI: 10.1177/1075547016663001](https://doi.org/10.1177/1075547016663001)

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