

For Map Users, Less May Be More

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Map users are often given the option to choose their own displays, but that doesn't mean they always choose the map that suits their needs.

In a new article, Mary Hegarty from the University of California, Santa Barbara reviews recent research suggesting that, when given the choice, both lay-people and experienced weather forecasters tend to select complicated maps containing information that's irrelevant to the task at hand. Research shows that including extraneous details makes maps more difficult to interpret; simple, task-focused maps, on the other hand, are easier to use.

While people may be sacrificing efficiency in reading the detailed map, Hegarty notes that the extra information could be useful in some situations.

“A weather forecaster might take more time to make a focused judgment about one variable if there are extraneous variables on a map, but at the same time, the more complex map may give him a deeper understanding that allows him to better anticipate tomorrow's weather.”

According to Hegarty, these findings could inform the way maps are designed, and help people to extract meaningful information from maps in an efficient way.

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