

For Two Months, I Got My News From Print Newspapers. Here's What I Learned.

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Credit Doug Chayka

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I first got news of the school shooting in Parkland, Fla., via an alert on my watch. Even though I had turned off news notifications months ago, the biggest news still somehow finds a way to slip through.

But for much of the next 24 hours after that alert, I heard almost nothing about the shooting.

There was a lot I was glad to miss. For instance, I didn't see the [false claims](#) — possibly amplified by [propaganda bots](#) — that the killer was a leftist, an anarchist, a member of ISIS and perhaps just one of multiple shooters. I missed the Fox News report tying him to [Syrian resistance groups](#) even before his name had been released. I also didn't see the claim circulated by many news outlets ([including The New York Times](#)) as well as by Senator Bernie Sanders and other liberals on Twitter that the massacre had been the 18th school shooting of the year, [which wasn't true](#).

Instead, the day after the shooting, a friendly person I've never met dropped off three newspapers at my front door. That morning, I spent maybe 40 minutes poring over the horror of the shooting and a million other things the newspapers had to tell me.

Not only had I spent less time with the story than if I had followed along as it unfolded online, I was better informed, too. Because I had avoided the innocent mistakes — and the more malicious misdirection — that had pervaded the first hours after the shooting, my first experience of the news was an accurate account of the actual events of the day.

This has been my life for nearly two months. In January, after the breaking-newsiest year in recent memory, I decided to travel back in time. I turned off my digital news notifications, unplugged from Twitter and other social networks, and subscribed to home delivery of three print newspapers — The Times, The Wall Street Journal and my local paper, The San Francisco Chronicle — plus a weekly newsmagazine, The Economist.

I have spent most days since then getting the news mainly from print, though my self-imposed asceticism allowed for podcasts, email newsletters and long-form nonfiction (books and magazine articles). Basically, I was trying to [slow-jam the news](#) — I still wanted to be informed, but was looking to formats that prized depth and accuracy over speed.

It has been life changing. Turning off the buzzing breaking-news machine I carry in my pocket was like unshackling myself from a monster who had me on speed dial, always ready to break into my day with half-baked bulletins.

Now I am not just less anxious and less addicted to the news, I am more widely informed (though there are some blind spots). And I'm embarrassed about how much free time I have — in two months, I managed to read half a dozen books, took up pottery and (I think) became a more attentive husband and father.

Most of all, I realized my personal role as a consumer of news in our broken digital news environment.

We have spent much of the past few years discovering that [the digitization of news is ruining how we collectively process information](#). Technology allows us to burrow into echo chambers, exacerbating misinformation and polarization and softening up society for propaganda. With artificial intelligence making [audio and video as easy to fake as text](#), we're entering a hall-of-mirrors dystopia, what some are calling an "[information apocalypse](#)." And we're all looking to the government and to Facebook for a fix.

But don't you and I also have a part to play? Getting news only from print newspapers may be extreme and probably not for everyone. But the experiment taught me several lessons about the pitfalls of digital news and how to avoid them.

I distilled those lessons into three short instructions, the way [the writer Michael Pollan once boiled down nutrition advice](#): Get news. Not too quickly. Avoid social.

Get news.

I know what you're thinking: Listening to a Times writer extol the virtues of print is like taking breakfast suggestions from Count Chocula.

You may also wonder if I am preaching to the choir, or doesn't everyone reading this story already appreciate print?

Probably not. The Times has about 3.6 million paying subscribers, but about three-quarters of them pay for just the digital version. During the 2016 election, fewer than 3 percent of Americans cited print as their most important source of campaign news; for people under 30, print was their least important source.

I'm nearly 40, but I'm no different. Though I have closely followed the news since I was a kid, I always liked my news on a screen, available at the touch of a button. Even with this experiment, I found much to hate about print. The pages are too big, the type too small, the ink too messy, and compared with a smartphone, a newspaper is more of a hassle to consult on the go.

Print also presents a narrower mix of ideas than you find online. You can't get BuzzFeed or Complex or Slate in print. In California, you can't even get The Washington Post in print. And print is expensive. Outside New York, after introductory discounts, seven-day home delivery of The Times will set you back \$81 a month. In a year, that's about the price of Apple's best iPhone.

What do you get for all that dough? News. That sounds obvious until you try it — and you realize how much of what you get online isn't quite news, and more like a never-ending stream of commentary, one that does more to distort your understanding of the world than illuminate it.



I noticed this first with the deal Democrats made to end the government shutdown late in January. On the Jan. 23 front pages, the deal was presented straight: “Shutdown Ends, Setting Up Clash Over ‘Dreamers,’” ran The Times’s headline on the news story, which appeared alongside an analysis piece that presented the political calculations surrounding the deal.

Many of the opinions in that analysis could be found on Twitter and Facebook. What was different was the emphasis. Online, commentary preceded facts. If you were following the shutdown on social networks, you most likely would have seen lots of politicians and pundits taking

stock of the deal before seeing details of the actual news.

This is common online. On social networks, every news story comes to you predigested. People don't just post stories — they post their takes on stories, often quoting key parts of a story to underscore how it proves them right, so readers are never required to delve into the story to come up with their own view.

There's nothing wrong with getting lots of shades of opinion. And reading just the paper can be a lonely experience; there were many times I felt in the dark about what the online hordes thought about the news.

Still, the prominence of commentary over news online and on cable news feels backward, and dangerously so. It is exactly our fealty to the crowd — to what other people are saying about the news, rather than the news itself — that makes us susceptible to misinformation.

Not too quickly.

It's been clear that breaking news has been broken since at least 2013, when a wild week of conspiracy theories followed the Boston Marathon bombing. [As I argued then](#), technology had caused the break.

Real life is slow; it takes professionals time to figure out what happened, and how it fits into context. Technology is fast. Smartphones and social networks are giving us facts about the news much faster than we can make sense of them, letting speculation and misinformation fill the gap.

It has only gotten worse. As news organizations evolved to a digital landscape dominated by apps and social platforms, they felt more pressure to push news out faster. Now, after something breaks, we're all buzzed with the alert, often before most of the facts are in. So you're driven online not just to find out what happened, but really to figure it out.

This was the surprise blessing of the newspaper. I was getting news a day old, but in the delay between when the news happened and when it showed up on my front door, hundreds of experienced professionals had done the hard work for me.

Now I was left with the simple, disconnected and ritualistic experience of reading the news, mostly free from the cognitive load of wondering whether the thing I was reading was possibly a blatant lie.

Another surprise was a sensation of time slowing down. One weird aspect of the past few years is how a "tornado of news-making has scrambled Americans' grasp of time and memory," as my colleague [Matt Flegenheimer put it last year](#). By providing a daily digest of the news, the newspaper alleviates this sense. Sure, there's still a lot of news — but when you read it once a day, the world feels contained and comprehensible rather than a blur of headlines lost on a phone's lock screen.

You don't need to read a print newspaper to get this; you can create your own news ritual by looking at a news app once a day, or reading morning newsletters like those from [Axios](#), or listening to a daily news podcast. What's important is choosing a medium that highlights deep stories over quickly breaking ones.

And, more important, you can turn off news notifications. They distract and feed into a constant sense of fragmentary paranoia about the world. They are also unnecessary. If something really big happens, you will find out.

Avoid social.

This is the most important rule of all. After reading newspapers for a few weeks, I began to see it wasn't newspapers that were so great, but social media that was so bad.

Just about every problem we battle in understanding the news today — and every one we will battle tomorrow — is exacerbated by plugging into the social-media herd. The built-in incentives on Twitter and Facebook reward speed over depth, hot takes over facts and seasoned propagandists over well-meaning analyzers of news.

You don't have to read a print newspaper to get a better relationship with the news. But, for goodness' sake, please stop getting your news mainly from Twitter and Facebook. In the long run, you and everyone else will be better off.

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