
# How to establish a media diet

Keeping up by slowing down

By Jibril Jolly
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Earlier this year, I began experimenting with different strategies for stepping outside of the 24-hour news cycle. I was overwhelmed by the continuous streams of information available online, and mainly consuming fleeting tweets and headlines. I felt like I knew a little bit about a lot of things and not a lot about anything specific. So I began reading a lot about how other people read the news and reconstructing my media diet according to my own information needs and time preferences.

In the age of the 24-hour news cycle, when high volumes of information are updated in real-time and are perpetually at your fingertips, choosing what to read, when, and how is a news literacy skill. In the same way that financial literacy requires knowing how money works and the most effective methods for managing it, news literacy requires familiarity with how *journalism is made and with the most effective ways to consume it.*

But before I could construct a news diet for myself, I needed to be familiar with available sources; I needed to know what tools existed to read or watch the news, spanning media (radio apps, RSS readers, curated apps, email newsletters, TV, Web video, print and digital editions of publications, social feeds); and I needed to have a useful system for mixing and matching platforms to create a reading routine that could keep me informed, sane, and fit my lifestyle.

While formalist training on how to do this isn't yet at the top of news literacy education agendas, which are still focused on teaching students to recognize reliable news sources, there are many tools and frameworks that do exist that helped me assess my schedule, manage my time, and help me start to read content in the most effective way.

One way to think about mitigating media overload is through the slow news movement, largely popularized by Dan Gillmor, director of the Knight Center for Digital Media Entrepreneurship at Arizona State University's Journalism School. It's named after the slow-food movement, which encourages consumers to buy, cook and eat slowly in order to fortify both their physical and mental health, going against society's emphasis on (unhealthily) convenient fast food.

In the words of slow-news blogger Marie-Catherine Beuth:

> *Instead of making their users fight to keep up with the 24 hour news cycle, I believe the media should make it easier for their (otherwise busy) users to be well-informed, especially when everything is reported in real-time. It is very pretentious to keep assuming we have our readers/watchers/listeners' attention at all times. It would be safer to bet on the fact that often enough, people have missed bits and pieces of unfolding stories. And they don't have a lot of time to catch up on news. I believe that solving this equation will make the media experience more valuable to its consumers. And hopefully improve the economics of journalism.*

Toward this end, she developed Newstapes, an experiment around the concept of a news concierge in which casual news consumers are caught up on what's going on in the world through curated "mixtapes" of news (here are some examples). That has since been developed into her current project, News on Demand. The formula she uses to power it is a three-step process that provides personalized facts and context based on a user's "attention profile," or how much time they have to read.

For those slow-news newbies who wish to fashion a news diet according to available time and depth of interest by themselves, rather than relying on other aggregators or curators, there are a host of tools available to help. Say for example, simple save-for-later services like Instapaper, Safari Reader, Pocket, or even WNYC's new save-for-offline-listening app. The trick is to consider uses for them in light of the framework that thinkers like Gillmor and Beuth provide for slow news.

"Carving out time for reflection is essential for everyone. I think that's a key point," says Gillmor, who does his longform reading in magazines and books, and mostly in the morning or while traveling. "We can't factcheck and vet all or even very much of what we read/hear/watch/etc., because we don't have the time or the resources. We should ask deeper questions when it's something close to home, and especially when we are making important decisions based on the information."

Here, for instance, are a set of questions (that came out of my experiment) to help construct a media diet, something my DIY news literacy guide. I borrowed insights from the meta-famous Getting Things Done time-management and productivity system, which was originally developed by David Allen, and from Jocelyn Glei's tips on building routine and maximizing creative energy.

*Question 1: Why am I consuming this news?*

—Is it news that I don't want to miss because it is about a place, people, or an issue I care for, am curious about, or am connected to through my personal, social, or professional communities?
—Is it news I consume by falling into a click-hole, through mindless procrastination, or because I feel I should consume it, because we don't have the time or the resources. We should ask deeper questions when it's something close to home, and especially when we are making important decisions based on the information."

*Question 2: What is the most effective way for me to consume news?*

—Do I want to consume only news from a trusted source to minimize source-vetting time or do I want to include time to verify what I'm finding?
—What device do I want to read or watch on? What time of day? Where will I be? How long will I read?

*Question 3: Do I want to act on this news?*

—Will I want to share it afterwards, in an email, an article, or social feed?
—Will I want to save it for later?
—Do I want to participate in the issue, write about it, comment or debate on it?

We make all these decisions while navigating streams of content but don't necessarily take the time to reflect upon them. But by exploring those questions, my uses for read-later services such as Instapaper changed: I would save all longform articles separately from breaking news, and schedule time to explore specific topics only when I'd have the bandwidth to do so. For example, I try to read a longform piece every morning that has something to do with the events of the last month—in the morning, my mind is clear, I have the attention for longform, and I can slowly digest it over the course of the day. Meanwhile, aside from the beats I cover, I only check breaking news updates through curated apps or newsfeed on tracking stories, because my attention span is shorter, I am likely on-the-go and I likely won't (and don't need to) remember them. And I allot specific time to comb through websites or publications I care for, reading short pieces then and there and saving longer ones for the next morning or a weekend.

Gillmor has developed similar strategies. "I assemble my own news report(s) from a variety of sources and tools, and increasingly I think that's true for most people, even if they don't do it consciously," he tells me in an email. "I spend considerable time following technology and policy issues. Some of the best information I get in those areas comes via mail lists where longtime experts send out links to things they considers important (usually they are). That automatically puts a time gap into the process, which is valuable," he continues. "The more current the news is, the more skeptical I am of what I'm seeing. That's been my rule for a long time, and is unlikely to change."

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Jibril Jolly is a freelance journalist and video-producer in New York City




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