

# **The Fundamental Unsuitability of Free Internet News for a Democratic Society**

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January 29, 2024

This essay is posted at <https://www.jackmanstatistics.com/commentary.html>  
in the Saving Newspapers section along with three previous essays on this subject.

## **A Radical Concept: Government by the Consent of the Governed**

Our country was founded on the then radical concept (1776) that the right to govern comes from the consent of those governed, not from heredity – as it had in most countries for thousands of years\*. Accordingly, **citizens of democratic governments should be informed** since decisions taken by government are done with their consent.

\* Classical Greece (around the fifth century B.C.E.) was a notable exception.

## **Informational Needs in a Democratic Society**

What information do citizens of democratic societies need to be able to provide informed consent to decisions made on their behalf by their elected representatives? Most decisions to which citizens provide input/feedback to their elected representatives are made at the city, county, regional, or state level, and citizens vote on issues (propositions) at these four levels. We do not directly vote on propositions at the national and international levels; our major input to these issues is via voting for national representatives who will work for what we want or think is right (for example, should the U.S. increase military aid to the Ukraine?).

**Do we have the time to stay informed to provide knowledgeable input to our elected representatives?**

If you live in the city of Oakland, for example, do you have the **time** to stay informed to vote knowledgeably on propositions that affect the City of Oakland, the East Bay, the greater Bay Area, and the state? Do you also have the time to stay informed on international issues on which you do not vote directly?

**For most people, the answer to both these questions appears to be “no.”** People in the East Bay to whom I have spoken to about this topic overwhelmingly tell me that with all the demands of work and family, they just do not have time to stay informed on these issues. These include people with of a range of education, including professional couples with master’s degrees and young children who clearly have a stake in the future well-being of democracy in the Bay Area.

**Do we have the will to stay informed to provide knowledgeable input to our elected representatives?**

As well as telling me that they don’t have the **time** to stay informed on issues they vote on, people in the East Bay to whom I have spoken to about this topic also tell me that they really don’t have the **will** (nor incentive) to stay informed given the time and effort entailed. They tell me they don’t need to be informed on local, state, national, and international news to do their jobs nor for their day-to-day life. This is particularly the case for those who do technical work, e.g., programming, for which they don’t need to know one iota about local, state, national, and international news to do their job well.

**Making Democracy Doable: A Time-Efficient Way to Stay Generally Informed**

Government by the consent of the governed only works if the governed are informed about what they are consenting to. So, it is critical that the time and effort required to be a generally informed citizen in a democracy be done in the

**most time-efficient way possible** given that so many citizens of the East Bay say they don't have time to stay informed.

Although I worked as a statistician/programmer in front of a computer for almost fifty years, I have found print newspapers, not the Internet, to be the most time-efficient way to be generally informed on local, state, national, and international news. I can accomplish this consistently **in about a half hour**. The print newspaper I have read for over a decade is the outstanding *East Bay Times* (which acquired the *Oakland Tribune* which I read previously). I also have access to the daily **online** edition of the East Bay Times which has the same organization and layout as the print edition. It exists in that format because of the economics of the print edition. However, I rarely use the online edition because I can read the print edition much faster.

**There's a lot of news out there.**

Each day there is plethora of news at every level. For example, California has 58 counties and 482 municipalities, the United States has 50 states, and our world has 195 countries. There is daily news in each of these entities. With so much news out there, how can one stay sufficiently informed in 30 minutes daily to vote knowledgeably on city, county, regional, and state issues and to be generally informed on international issues?

**Print newspapers enable us to accomplish this.** Print newspapers report to us on a small subset of all the daily news developments which are pertinent to Americans in our own city, region, and state. Newspapers are organized by section, and within sections items are roughly ordered by importance/significance; this facilitates staying informed and keeping news items in perspective.

The main section of a newspaper usually contains national and international news. As noted above, the United States has 50 states, and our world has 195 countries, but newspapers report only a small subset of all the daily national and international developments that generally informed Americans in their communities should know about.

Print newspapers enable us to retain information by clipping it.

You might think that in the age of the Internet there is no benefit from clipping articles. This is not true at our home.

Clipping for my wife. Literally every night I clip articles for my wife who is not the avid print newspaper reader I am. Before I clip, I underline with red ink the parts relevant to her. If I did not clip the article, I would not remember to tell her about it the next day. Each morning I find articles on the bench in my den which I cut out the night before. When I see them, only then do I remember why I cut them out or even that I saw them. I then pass them on to my wife. She is very busy, so usually reads only the parts I underlined with red ink. This saves her time.

Clipping for my essays. I use clipped articles for my essays, **much more now than a decade or two ago**. Many articles I clip from print newspapers are hard to find later on the Internet -- if you can find them. I underline the relevant parts of my clipped articles with red ink, so I don't have to re-read the entire articles when I use it later, a significant time-saver.

About two-thirds of the research for this essay is from clipped articles compared to about one-third for my past essays. Why has this percentage gone up? Because those who research and write these reports want to get paid. Consider a report

from *The New York Times*: First, there is the expense of just running the organization: facilities, administration, etc. Then there are the human costs to produce the report. Quality reporting requires educated and experienced professionals to research and write the reports.

A decade ago, I could find a report from *The New York Times* online and copy or download what I wanted from it. I can't do this anymore. Now, *The New York Times* wants me subscribe to their newspaper before I can copy or download an article. The same is true for other large newspapers such as the *Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Times*, etc. They require this even though I am a long-time subscriber to our local newspaper, the *East Bay Times*. This is clearly an unworkable situation: I am not going to subscribe to all these newspapers just so I can access their articles infrequently. So, nowadays I use online information less and depend more on clipped articles.

### **Major articles from *East Bay Times* on January 22, 2024**

Here are some examples from January 22, 2024 of how the *East Bay Times* helps us to stay informed efficiently with relevant information so we can provide knowledgeable feedback to our elected representatives and make democracy work. These are not sexy, titillating items put there to get you to click on a link to buy something, but they are the essential items necessary to make democracy workable at the city, county, regional, state, and national levels.

The economics of print newspapers (and of their online replicas) are very different from those of free online news. Once a year (or for a longer period), you renew your subscription to a print newspaper (and of its online replica). So, the newspaper only needs to get you "to click" once a year. During that year, the staff

of the newspaper can concentrate on keeping you informed with information pertinent to where you vote without having to constantly tailor its information to where you might click in the next few seconds.

In contrast, free online news and the advertising on which it depends are highly oriented to where you might click in the next few seconds. Sexy or titillating items get clicks unlike the eight “staid” reports from the *East Bay Times* of **January 22, 2024** which follow.

### **From the Main Page A1**

- “TRANSPORTATION: Is the Bay Area entering a ‘golden age of ferries?’ With a new era of waterfront housing on the horizon, a much maligned mode of public transportation makes a bid for riders” by Will McCarthy, Bay Area News Group
- “2024 ELECTION: DeSantis drops out of race for president. Republican governor of Florida exits before the New Hampshire primary, endorses Donald Trump” by Steve Peoples, Thomas Beaumont and Holly Ramer of the Associated Press
- “CALIFORNIA POLITICS: The first U.S. Senate race debate is tonight; here’s how to watch and what to look for” by John Woolfolk, Bay Area News Group

### **From the Local section, page B1**

- “TRANSPORTATION: Bill calls for a merger of transit services. State Sen Aisha Wahab proposes the consolidation of some Bay Area agencies” by Grace Hase, Bay Area News Group

- “CALIFORNIA: Market for new hotels implodes report says. Number of new projects in the Bay Area plunged 32% from 2022; room numbers plummet” by George Avalos, Bay Area News Group.
- “EDUCATION: Community colleges wary of spending COVID funds” by Adam Echelman, *CalMatters*

### **From the Business section**

- p. C7 “Solar industry sales suffer a big setback in California. Installations have dropped as much as 85% since April” by Ivan Penn, *The New York Times*
- p. C8 “COPYRIGHT: Pair finds their songs were hijacked by phantom artists. Steaming is costing artists \$2 billion a year” by David Segal, *The New York Times*

### **Major articles from AT&T Free Online News on January 22, 2024**

Here are some “**headlines**” from AT&T Free Online News

(<https://currently.att.yahoo.com>) from **January 22, 2024**. As written above, free online news and the advertising on which it depends are highly oriented to where you might click in the next second or two. Sexy or titillating items get clicks unlike the “staid” reports from the East Bay Times of January 22, 2024 shown above.

- “Disrespecting Doll Parton.” “Elle King blasted by fans for ‘disrespectful’ Dolly Parton birthday celebration performance” by Elizabeth Stanton, Fox News

- “Kanye posts nude photos of wife.” “Kanye West Slammed for Posting Nearly Nude Photo of Wife Bianca Censori in Thong Bodysuit” by Alyssa Norwin, In Touch Weekly
- “Tony Romo makes another Taylor Swift on-air gaffe.” “Tony Romo once again jumps the gun on Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce's relationship” by Steve Gardner, USA TODAY
- “Friends Found Dead In Missouri Backyard.” “After 3 Friends Found Dead In Missouri Backyard, Families Demand Answers” by Pocharapon Neammanee, HuffPost
- “Tech CEO falls to his death.” “Tech CEO falls to his death in front of horrified employees at company party in India” by Anders Hagstrom, Fox Business
- “Man Accused of Stabbing Tourists in NYC makes bizarre claim.” “Man Accused of Stabbing Tourists in NYC Claims They’re FBI Plants” by Josh Fiallo, The Daily Beast.

Here are a few other **“headlines”** from AT&T Currently.com free online news from previous days.

- 2023-01-18 “Camera to catch woman killer of husband.” “Husband Uncovers Wife’s Alleged Murder Plot Using Home Security Cameras” by Declan Gallagher, *Men’s Journal*
- 2024-01-17 “Idaho man confessed to killing girlfriend.” “Idaho man confessed to killing girlfriend, living with corpse for weeks, police say” by Sarah Al-Arshani, *USA TODAY*
- 2024-01-15 “Kevin Costner’s Ex Christine Is Dating Josh Connor After Divorce: She Is ‘Happy’” by Jack Smart and Linda Marx, *People*.



## **Free Internet news, including that on social media, is fundamentally unsuited for a democratic society**

This is not a new situation. From my 2011-2012 and 2020 essays,

### **“Does the Internet Foster an Informed Electorate?”**

“There is concern that the Internet is not equally conducive to fostering an informed electorate. The following is from a June 27, 2011 article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* by Erin Allday entitled,

"FIELD POLL. Politics on fewer voters' radar. Experts say Internet lets users tune out information." (p. C1):

"A growing proportion of California voters is not paying much attention to politics and what's happening in government as they are increasingly drawn to the Internet as their primary source of news, according to Field Poll results released today."

"...political scientists said Sunday that they blame the Internet in large part for waning interest in government affairs, especially among younger persons.”

## **Making Democracy Doable: Staying Informed of Relevant Information**

### **In 30 Minutes Per Day**

From above: People in the East Bay to whom I have spoken to about this topic overwhelmingly tell me that with all the demands of work and family, they just do not have time to stay informed on city, county, regional, state, and national issues. These include people with of a range of education, including professional couples with master’s degrees and young children who clearly have a stake in the future well-being of democracy in the Bay Area. Yet, an informed citizenry is

indispensable to making democracy work in the Bay Area and California. Government by the consent of the governed only works if the governed understand what they are consenting to.

Citizens of the Bay Area are not going to be able to stay informed about relevant voter information in a **half hour per day** if they use this **allotted half hour** reading these titillating items on AT&T Free Online News (<https://currently.att.yahoo.com>) such as “Kanye posts nude photos of wife.” But the economics of free online services is based on click rates which determine advertising rates. Items such as “Kanye posts nude photos of wife” get more clicks than would items which appeared the same day in the *East Bay Times* such as “TRANSPORTATION: Bill calls for a merger of transit services.” Yet, the latter information is essential information to make democracy work: government by the consent of the governed—who are informed about what they are consenting to.

**“Tech” leaders say this essential information has “no economic benefit.”**

There is a cost to the *East Bay Times* for researching, writing, and publishing reports such as “TRANSPORTATION: Bill calls for a merger of transit services” or “CALIFORNIA: Market for new hotels implodes report says.” The *East Bay Times* accepts and incurs this cost because their mission is to help their readers (who subscribe for a year or more) to stay informed in a time-efficient manner about city, county, regional, state, and national issues so they can vote on these issues knowledgeably. This information is **the lifeblood of a workable democracy** in which elected representatives make decisions with the consent of the governed.

Free online news services regularly post some of these reports on their “News Feeds” without sharing their cost with the newspapers which produce them. Bills have been proposed at the federal and California state (AB 886) levels to require

Big Tech, e.g., Facebook, to pay newspapers for aggregating their news content online. Both bills were dropped due to intense lobbying by Big Tech.

### Canada more proactive

Canada was not intimidated by opposition from Big Tech and “passed a law requiring digital platforms to pay local publishers.” In response, “Meta Platforms said it will end the availability of news on Facebook and Instagram for all users in Canada.” “Tech giants argued that they would be unfairly forced to pay for content that has no economic benefits...”

“SOCIAL MEDIA: Meta blocks news on sites in Canada” by Randy Thanthong-Knight, *Blomberg*. This report appeared in the *East Bay Times* on June 23, 2023 pp. C7-C8.

### **This is how Big Tech views the lifeblood of a workable democracy.**

According to Big Tech, including Meta Platforms and its CEO Mark Zuckerberg, information such as “TRANSPORTATION: Bill calls for a merger of transit services” and “CALIFORNIA: Market for new hotels implodes report says” which appeared in the *East Bay Times* on January 22, 2024 has **no economic benefits**. This is wrong and perverse thinking. Such information is **the lifeblood of a workable democracy**. It may not be readily sellable and may not generate high click rates for selling online ads but it is essential to a workable democracy in which elected representatives make decisions with the consent of the governed who are informed about what they are consenting to.

**Free Internet news, including that on social media, is fundamentally unsuited for a democratic society**

**The Benefit of the Immediacy of “Real Time” News on Social Media Is a Spurious Claim.**

From the Internet on January 25, 2024,

“Why is social media better than newspapers?”

“With social media, news can be spread and updated instantly, allowing for real-time coverage of events as they unfold. In contrast, newspapers are typically printed once a day or once a week, meaning that the information they contain is often a day or two old by the time it reaches readers.” Feb 6, 2023

This is a ridiculous claim for benefits of the immediacy of news on social media. Citizens of the Bay Area who are juggling their time to try to find 30 minutes per day to stay informed on **relevant** city, county, regional, and state issues so they can vote knowledgeably on propositions every two or four years **do not need real-time updates** on these issues. **We are not real-time decision makers** for these issues. For most of us, our most frequent input to these government decisions is voting every two years.

Secretary-of-State Antony Blinken, in contrast, **does need real-time updates** about conditions in Gaza, the Ukraine, etc., because he is involved in **real-time decision-making** about these developments. **Most of us do not provide input to these real-time decisions.** Our role is that of informed citizens, and for this role, newspapers are very appropriate; it does not matter that we read our newspaper in the morning when it arrives or that evening or the next day or the day after that.

**Newspapers are ideally suited for citizens who want to stay generally informed and whose basic input to issues is voting every two or four years.** Newspapers will wait for you until you have time to read them, and much of their information is pertinent even if you read them a week or more later, such as a summary of a new economic or medical report. **For most of us, the immediacy of news**

**reporting as touted by the Internet and by television is irrelevant, and the claim that this immediacy is beneficial to us is spurious.**

Given this, it is remarkable that Facebook touts their News Feed which is “constantly updating list of stories in the middle of your home page.” Most of us **don’t need to be updated in real-time** throughout the day. This barrage of real-time updates not only is not useful to us, but occupies our scarce time and energy that could be used to acquire relevant information to be informed voters in our communities.

**Free Internet (online) news, including that on social media, is fundamentally unsuited for a democratic society.**

### **The Benefits of a Abundance of News on Social Media Is a Spurious Claim.**

From the Internet on January 25, 2024,

“Unlike traditional news outlets that are often limited by geographical boundaries, social media platforms have no such constraints. News stories can go viral and be shared across continents, reaching individuals who may not have had access to the same information through traditional channels.” Dec 4, 2023

“In today’s digital age, social media has become an integral part of our lives. It has revolutionized the way we communicate, connect, and share information. One area where social media has had a significant impact is in the dissemination of news. Gone are the days when people relied solely on traditional news outlets like newspapers and television to stay informed. With the rise of social media platforms, news is now being spread faster, wider, and more interactively than ever before.”

“The Power of Social Media in News Spreading.”

<https://www.yellowbrick.co/blog/journalism/the-power-of-social-media-in-news-spreading>

This is a ridiculous claim of the benefits of a greater abundance of news on social media. Citizens of the Bay Area are already juggling their time to try to find 30 minutes per day to stay informed of relevant city, county, regional, and state issues so they can vote knowledgeably on propositions every two or four years. Many or most say that they cannot stay abreast of **even this relevant** information much less the greater abundance of news on social media

### A plethora of News

Each day there is plethora of news at every level. For example, California has 58 counties and 482 municipalities, the United States has 50 states, and our world has 195 countries. There is daily news in each of these entities. With so much news out there, citizens of the Bay Area need help to cull this plethora of information to be able to stay sufficiently informed in 30 minutes daily with **relevant** information to vote knowledgeably on city, county, regional, and state issues and to be generally informed on international issues.

**Print newspapers enable us to accomplish this.** They report to us on a small subset of all the daily news developments which are pertinent to Americans in our own city, region, and state. Newspapers are organized by section, and within sections items are roughly ordered by importance/significance; this facilitates staying informed and keeping news items in perspective.

**There is a plethora of unorganized, unprioritized news** on the Internet (online) and on social media that not only does not help us to be efficiently informed on

**relevant** issues we vote on in our own city, region, and state but impedes us from doing so with titillating, distracting news feeds tailored to get us to click and buy.

**Free Internet (online) news, including that on social media, is fundamentally unsuited for a democratic society.**

### **The Proliferation of Internet and Social Media “News”**

#### **Is the Major Factor Driving the Growth of “Fake News” in Recent Years**

From the Internet on January 25, 2024,

“Furthermore, social media has empowered individuals to become citizen journalists. With just a smartphone and an internet connection, anyone can capture and share news in real-time. This has led to an increase in user-generated content, where eyewitnesses and individuals on the ground can report news as it happens. Citizen journalism has played a crucial role in breaking news stories and providing unique perspectives that may not have been covered by traditional news outlets.”

“The Power of Social Media in News Spreading.”

<https://www.yellowbrick.co/blog/journalism/the-power-of-social-media-in-news-spreading>

As the above article notes, “With just a smartphone and an internet connection, anyone can capture and share news in real-time. This has led to an increase in user-generated content.” This article presents this as a strength of online news but **in fact it is a weakness**. This “user-generated content” does not go through any peer review before it is uploaded to the Internet, so anything and everything gets uploaded.

Often this is health-related content. Nutritionist Ed Blonz, PhD, who writes a nutrition column (“ON NUTRITION”) for the *East Bay Times* recently entitled his

column “Social media spreads nonsense” (December 23, 2023, p.B12)

“DEAR DR. BLONZ>> I heard a lecturer on TikTok stating that an organic tomato can have nine times the iron of a conventionally grown tomato. Is this correct? – B.O., Atlanta”

“DEAR B.O.>> Where do they come up with this stuff? An organically grown tomato and conventionally grown tomato will each provide about .3 mg of iron. I’m posting your question because the more salient issue here is the growing enormity of health nonsense on social media – sometimes presented in engaging lectures by people who appear to know what they are talking about and to have genuine credentials.”

#### Health Reports in the *East Bay Times*

I am a regular, long-time reader of health reports in the *East Bay Times* and have an engineering/science background; I have not encountered nonsense or fake news health reports in this newspaper. Some health reports in the *East Bay Time* are written by Lisa M. Krieger, science writer for the *Mercury News* and the *East Bay Times*, who covers science, medicine, and environmental news, including water issues. Ms. Krieger’s medical reports consistently cite the source medical journals that the information comes from, e.g., the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) or the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

Other health reports in the *East Bay Time* are from *The New York Times*. These reports give the author(s) and the source medical journals that the information comes from. Reports in *The New York Times* are submitted to thorough fact-checking, a practice at *The New York Times* since the 1920s.



## **Fake news has become popular with various media outlets and platforms.**

(from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fake\\_news](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fake_news))

“Fake news has become popular with various media outlets and platforms. Researchers at Pew Research Center discovered that over 60% of Americans access news through social media compared to traditional newspaper and magazines.[34] With the popularity of social media, individuals can easily access fake news and disinformation. The rapid spread of false stories on social media during the 2012 elections in Italy has been documented, as has diffusion of false stories on Facebook during the 2016 US election campaign.[35]

“Fake news has the tendency to become viral among the public. With the presence of social media platforms like Twitter, it becomes easier for false information to diffuse quickly.”

“Fake news has become increasingly prevalent over the last few years, with over 100 misleading articles and rumors spread regarding the 2016 United States presidential election alone.[12] These fake news articles tend to come from satirical news websites or individual websites with an incentive to propagate false information, either as clickbait or to serve a purpose.[12] Since they typically hope to intentionally promote incorrect information, such articles are quite difficult to detect.[70]”

## **The Current Surge of Fake News Is an Internet (Online) Phenomenon**

How serious is the current surge on fake news on the Internet? Very serious according to California education leaders as shown by this recent report from *CalMatters*.

“EDUCATION: Recognizing fake news now a required subject in California schools”

“Pushing back against the surge of misinformation online, California will now

require all K12 students to learn media literacy skills – such as recognizing fake news and thinking critically about what they encounter on the internet.”  
(This *CalMatters* report appeared in the East Bay Times on November 26, 2023, p.B12.)

### Lying and False Information Have Occurred Throughout History

Although lying and the dissemination of false information has occurred throughout history, the term "fake news" was first used in the 1890s when sensational reports in newspapers were common. This practice was called Yellow Journalism, a phrase coined to describe the tactics employed in the furious competition between two New York City newspapers, the *World* and the *Journal*. Yellow Journalism was common during 1895–1898.

### Fact-checking by Newspapers

To deal with problems such as Yellow Journalism, professional fact checkers have been employed by newspapers, magazines, and book publishers, probably starting in the early 1920s. Articles that are selected to appear in newspapers like the *East Bay Times* or *The New York Times* undergo thorough fact checking before being published in these newspapers.

### Fact-checking in its infancy in online sources and will be difficult to extend.

From <https://www.yellowbrick.co/blog/journalism/the-power-of-social-media-in-news-spreading>

#### “Addressing Challenges

“However, with the rise of social media as a news dissemination platform, some challenges need to be addressed. The speed at which news spreads on social media can sometimes lead to the spread of misinformation and fake news. It is important for users to critically evaluate the sources and credibility of news stories

before sharing them. News organizations and journalists also play a crucial role in fact-checking and verifying information before publishing it on social media platforms.”

Fact-checking is in its infancy in online source and will be difficult to extend due to the ease of posting anything on the Internet compared to the rigorous series of steps required to put an article in a print newspaper like the *East Bay Times* or *The New York Times*. From earlier in this essay, “With just a smartphone and an internet connection, anyone can capture and share news in real-time. This has led to an increase in user-generated content.” Also, from earlier in this essay, “These fake news articles tend to come from satirical news websites or individual websites with an incentive to propagate false information, either as clickbait or to serve a purpose.” **Any fact-checking, much less thorough fact-checking, will be difficult to ever achieve for most Internet posts.**

**Free Internet news, including that on social media, is fundamentally unsuited for a democratic society**

**The current deluge of online news may be bad for homo sapiens.**

From earlier in this essay,

“**There is a plethora of unorganized, unprioritized news** on the Internet (online) and on social media that not only does not help us to be efficiently informed on **relevant** issues we vote on in our own city, region, and state but impedes us from doing so with titillating, distracting news feeds tailored to get us to click and buy.

**Free Internet (online) news, including that on social media, is fundamentally unsuited for a democratic society.”**

However, it is likely that this plethora of information not only impedes us from being informed voters but is bad for us. Homo sapiens today has essentially the same body and brain as it did around 300,000 years ago when early modern humans first appeared in Africa. Those were simpler times, and humans were not deluged with an incessant bombardment of extraneous online information. We evolved in those simpler times. There is growing evidence that the plethora of information coming at us today is not good for us: we did not evolve to absorb this bombardment.

“THE ARGUMENT” BY Amy E. Herman

“THE AGE OF DISTRACTION. When we inundate our brain with too much information, it simply slows down.”

“Thanks to a wireless web with a constant flow of information available to us anytime, anywhere, there are more things competing for our attention than ever before. Today more people have access to cellphones than to working toilets, and the average person checks their phone 110 times a day and nearly once every 6 seconds in the evening. Our perpetual, byte-size interactions are not only a detriment to our concentration, focus, productivity, and personal safety, but they’re also hurting our intelligence. A study at King’s College at London University found that when distracted, workers suffered a 10- to 15-point IQ loss – a greater dumbing down than experienced when smoking marijuana. A 15-point deficiency is significant, as it brings an adult male down to the same IQ level as an eight-year-old child.” (*Saturday Evening Post*, July/August 2022, p.8)

**Free Internet (online) news, including that on social media, is fundamentally unsuited for a democratic society.”**

**Internet news is television news on steroids.**

This essay is focused on the topic “The Fundamental Unsuitability of Free Internet

News for a Democratic Society.” Internet news abounds with sexy, titillating items put there to get you to click on a link to buy something. There are thousands upon thousands of links you can go to.

Television news has a similar orientation. At any minute, you might change the channel, and the station would lose you as part of their demographic (advertising) audience. TV executives think they are less likely to lose you (i.e., when you change channels) if they offer lots of sexy, titillating items rather than “staid” local news items such as “TRANSPORTATION: Bill calls for a merger of transit services. State Sen Aisha Wahab proposes the consolidation of some Bay Area agencies” by Grace Hase which appeared in the *East Bay Times* on January 22, 2024 (see above).

TV viewers can change channels if, for example, they are bored and want something more exciting. But they may have a limited number of alternative channels to switch to. The Internet, in contrast, offers thousands of links you can easily and quickly go to. **Internet news is television news on steroids**, but both the Internet and television have the same orientation and tendencies.

I covered the topic of television news in **my essay of December 30, 2012** (pp. 7-8) which I have copied below.

## II. The Problem with Television News

Television is much more modern and "high-tech" than newspapers which have existed since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. So why are media experts so harshly critical of such a high-tech medium as television?

- Professor Arthur I. Blaustein teaches community development, public policy and politics at UC Berkeley. He was appointed by President Bill Clinton to the board of the National Endowment for the Humanities. He wrote in a March 6, 2009 essay in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (Insight, H6-H7),

"The decline in our political culture has occurred in direct proportion to the increase in TV-driven soft news, celebrity scandal-mongering and superficial political coverage. Every day the electronic media -- in particular cable TV -- feverishly compete to hype news into entertainment.

"And when they get a Paris Hilton, Michael Jackson, Elliot Spitzer or Larry Craig -- especially if it has a sex angle -- they stage extravaganzas which would make Barnum and Bailey blush.

"With the attention span of viewers decreasing with each generation, and with the networks and cables competing for a large audience, what counts is who can make the fastest and most enjoyable images. Faster images may tickle the pleasure centers of viewers and achieve higher ratings and more money for media owners, but they make America dumb."

As part of Blaustein's "commonsense prescription for change," he proposes: "Pull the plug on television news, and stick with serious print media."

- Howard Kurtz who writes the column "Spin Cycle" in *Newsweek* magazine wrote in the May 23 & 30, 2011 edition of *Newsweek* (p. 35),

"Much of the time, the media wallow in frivolity. Television, especially cable news, has a fatal weakness for the superficial and the shiny. Covering

Charlie Sheen is cheap; covering Afghanistan is expensive. Boots-on-the-ground reporting may win awards, but it doesn't pay the bills."

- Joshua Alston who writes on Culture/Television for *Newsweek* magazine referred to the "if-it-bleeds-it-leads local newscast[s]" in the January 10 & 17, 2011 edition of *Newsweek*, (p. 52).

### Television News' Sequencing Problem

Television News' Sequencing Problem can best be understood by comparing television to newspapers which are not constrained by sequencing considerations. Subscribing to a print newspaper is an on-off decision: you do or you don't, and once you do, the editors of newspapers don't have to worry about sequencing the articles to maximize "viewers" at every instance.

So, if you subscribe to the *Oakland Tribune* as we do, you may go first to the Obituary section, then to the crossword puzzles, then sports and then finally quickly page through the other sections, including the main section. However, the *Tribune* has not "lost you" because you bypassed the main page and went directly to Obituaries. Nor does the *Tribune* have to dilute the quality of the main page or make it more titillating to attract you there. No matter what section you choose to go to first, the *Tribune* still "has" you.

However, the situation television news shows face is very different. Television news viewers can change channels at any time because they're bored, want something more exciting, or for any reason. Once they change channels, Network A, for example, has lost them -- at least for the time being. If a rating agency such

as Arbitron, Inc. did a survey of the audience of Network A at that point, it would report a smaller audience for Network A than it would have had if the bored viewers had not changed channels. This would mean less profit for Network A since advertising rates are based on estimated audiences.

So, television news shows must sequence items to maintain large audiences with the demographic characteristics attractive to advertisers. These economic forces drive TV news networks to cater to the "lowest common denominator." And this is reflected in the items which lead on television news shows and the sequencing of the items which follow. TV networks do this to maintain the most profitable mix of viewers at every moment.

Newspapers are not subject to the sequencing problem. Whether readers go first to sports, obituaries or entertainment rather than to the main section, the newspaper has not "lost" them, nor, as noted above, does it have to dilute the quality of the main news sections to retain them. Newspapers' circulation which determines advertising rates is unaffected by which section of the newspaper readers start with and the order in which they read the other sections and whether they read all the sections.

### **Are print newspapers compatible with sustainable existence on our planet?**

This essay has shown that print newspapers enable us to be efficiently informed in about 30 minutes per day about the relevant information we need to vote knowledgeably on propositions at the city, county, regional, or state level. In contrast, Internet (online) news impedes us from doing so with sexy, titillating, distracting news feeds tailored to get us to click and buy. Given its clear advantages, **can we afford print newspapers?** And are print newspapers



compatible with sustainable existence on our planet? The answer is definitely “yes.”

### The Major Points:

- **Packaging**, not print, is the single largest category of paper use (**72%**).

**Newsprint’s share of paper use is less than one percent.**

(Source: Statista, 2024).

Packaging Uses (53.6% + 12.6% + 5.6% = 71.8%)

Case materials 53.6%

Cartonboard 12.6%

Other papers mainly for packaging 5.6%

Printing & writing papers 11.7%

House sanitary 10.3%

Wrapping paper 3.8%

Other paper and paperboard 1.9%

**Newsprint 0.5%**

- Newspapers are recycled. About one-third are made into newsprint. About a third are exported (think about all the cardboard boxes needed to box all the consumer goods America imports). The remaining third is used to make cereal boxes, egg cartons, paper plates, grocery bags, tissue paper, napkins, cellulose insulation, animal bedding, and compost.
- Newsprint is the base paper on which news is printed to become newspapers. **Newsprint is made from recycled papers.** But 100 % recycled pulp cannot be used for newsprint because it will not give sufficient

strength to newsprint to run on high-speed printing presses nor to be folded prior to delivery.

- Newsprint can be recycled five to seven times after which the fibers have become too short to bond into new paper. At this point, newsprint can be recycled into cellulose insulation, animal bedding, compost, or other uses.
- New pulp, which is combined with recycled pulp, almost always comes from trees specifically grown for papermaking. A tree harvested for papermaking is soon replaced by another, so the cycle continues. Most of the trees cut for paper come from fifth or sixth generation pulp-wood forests.
- Trees, the source of the wood pulp for paper, are a renewable natural resource in contrast to non-renewable (or exhaustible) resources such as petroleum and natural gas. Trees are renewable, recyclable, and sustainable.
- Trees to produce paper are harvested in a sustainable way. Sustainable harvesting of timber was already in practice in German forests by the mid-1800s, and these methods have been improved and refined since then. In both the U.S. and Canada, responsible forest management has resulted in more than 50 consecutive years of net forest growth that exceeds annual forest harvests. Every year, the United States plants more than 1 billion trees, and Canada plants 600 million trees. The most recent data of the United States Forest Service shows that United States forestland is roughly

as abundant today as it was 100 years ago.

- **Young trees are the most effective at capturing greenhouse gases (carbon sequestration).** When trees are harvested in a program of sustainable harvesting to make wood and paper products, young trees replace older trees. Young, growing, vibrant forests are the largest carbon sink on earth: CO<sub>2</sub> absorption by U.S. forests has increased by 25 percent since 1990. (Reducing U.S. Greenhouse Gas Emissions: How Much at What Cost? McKinsey & Company, 2007.)

When a young forest is growing, it produces 1.07 tons of oxygen and absorbs 1.47 tons of carbon dioxide for every ton of wood. But as the forest matures, growth slows, and the absorption rate drops off. Harvesting a mature forest sequesters the carbon in the wood, meaning it will not be released into the atmosphere. A 2,400-square-foot wood-frame house, for example, has 28.5 tons of carbon dioxide sequestered, roughly equivalent to seven years' worth of emissions from a small, light-duty car. Harvesting mature forests also allows new, young forests with a rapid rate of carbon absorption to take their places, continuing the cycle.

John A. Helms, Ph.D., professor emeritus of forestry at the University of California, Berkeley writes,

"...it's the young trees and forests that are most efficient in taking up carbon. Not that old forests don't contribute - they do. But when their capacity to remove carbon is measured against young forests, old forests come up short. In young forests, the uptake of carbon dioxide greatly

exceeds the loss. The reverse can be true for very old forests."

"To maximize carbon sequestration and storage, we need forest management that results in healthy forests of all ages on the landscape."

"What's good for forest health is good for carbon sequestration. Active forest management can certainly increase carbon sequestration."

- Sustainable harvesting supports the preservation of forests. Fifty six percent of America's forests are privately owned, and private land owners plant about 3-4 times more trees than they harvest.

### **Can reading newspapers be cool again?**

This essay has addressed the question of how busy people in the East Bay can manage to stay informed in about 30 minutes per day on relevant city, county, regional, and state issues so they can vote knowledgeably on their corresponding propositions. I have shown that the organization of print newspapers (and their online replicas) and the pertinent information they present are far superior for accomplishing this objective than Internet and social media news. There is a plethora of unorganized, unprioritized news on the Internet (online) and on social media that not only does not help us to be efficiently informed on relevant issues we vote on in our own city, region, and state but impedes us from doing so with sexy, titillating, and distracting news feeds tailored to get us to click and buy.

"News" on the Internet and social media impedes being an informed voter.

I read the print edition of the *East Bay Times* daily in about 30 minutes and

manage to stay basically informed on issues facing Oakland, Alameda County, the East Bay, the greater Bay Area, and California. I also manage to stay generally informed on international issues although I do not directly vote on these issues.

I talk to college-educated people in our community who don't subscribe to nor read a newspaper and who tell me they "get their news on the Internet." Most of them are uninformed about even basic information about Oakland and the East Bay such as what district of Oakland they live in, who is their representative on the city council, who are the council representatives from neighboring Oakland districts, what are the issues with office vacancies in downtown Oakland, what are the issues with the police in Antioch, who is their state assembly representative, who is their state senator, etc.

**Free Internet (online) news, including that on social media, is fundamentally unsuited for a democratic society.**

### **The decline of newspapers**

This essay has shown the far superiority of newspapers compared to free, Internet (online) news for enabling us to be informed voters in a time-effective manner. Despite this clear superiority, newspapers have experienced a precipitous decline as shown by the following reports. They are based on surveys, and survey results often vary. Regardless, these reports all point to the decline of newspapers.

- "A survey held in February 2022 revealed that **most consumers never use newspapers as a source of news**, and only 21 percent of adults aged 65 or above (those who engage with newspapers the most) reported reading

newspapers every day.” Jan 4, 2024

“Newspaper consumption frequency U.S. by ethnicity 2022”

Statista <https://www.statista.com> › Media › News

- “A study released in June by Northwestern University Medill School of Journalism found that newspapers are folding at an average of more than two per week, and that the country has lost more than a fourth of its newspapers – about 2,500 overall – and 60% of its working journalists since 2005. That has created so-called news deserts, where 1 out of 5 people in the U.S. have limited access to local news.”  
“MEDIA: Support ends for bill seeking fee for news” by Robert Channick, *Chicago Tribune*. This report appeared in the *East Bay Times* on September 6, 2022, pp. C7-C8.
- “The local media ecosystem has been in steep decline during the new millennium. Newspaper ad revenue, which peaked at \$49.4 billion in 2005, fell by more than 80% to \$9.6 billion, according to the Pew Research Center.”  
“REVISIONS ACCEPTED: Bill requiring tech to pay for news advances” by Robert Channick, *Chicago Tribune*. This report appeared in the *East Bay Times* on September 23, 2022, pp. C7-C8
- “But backers said something has to be done to save the news industry. They note that since 2005, the U.S. has lost 2,500 newspapers and by 2025 it is estimated that a third of those that were in operation 20 years ago will be gone. California has lost more than 100 newspapers in the last decade.”

“CALIFORNIA: Assembly passes bill to make Big Tech pay publishers”

by John Woolfolk, *East Bay Times*, June 2, 2023, pp. A1, A5

- “California has lost more than 100 newspapers in the last decade,” said Assemblywoman Buffy Wicks, an Oakland Democrat, who plans to introduce the California Journalism Protection Act in the coming week. “Our constitutional founders understood the importance of a free press. And when you have an ecosystem where there’s not a level playing field and newspapers are shutting down left and right, that concerns me from a democracy standpoint.”

According [to] the California News Publishers Association, which is sponsoring Wick’s bill, AB 886, and to which the Bay Area News Group belongs, 52% of California residents get their news through Facebook and 49% from Google. Those two Silicon Valley companies – divisions of Meta Platforms and Alphabet Inc., respectively – gobble 60% of all digital ad dollars thanks to their ability to collect consumer data.

Wicks bill notes that newspaper advertising has fallen 66% and newsroom staffing has shrunk 44% over the last 10 years.

Her bill follows the December collapse of a similar Journalism Competition and Preservation Act in Congress, a bill carried by U.S. Sens. Amy Klobuchar, a Minnesota Democrat, and John Kennedy, a Louisiana Republican.

The federal bill would have waived antitrust restrictions so news publishers could join in negotiating revenue-sharing agreements with platform content providers such as Facebook and Google. Similar laws have been introduced in Spain and Australia where they are known as “link taxes.”

“CALIFORNIA JOURNALISM PROTECTION ACT. Bill aims to make Big Tech pay publishers for news” by John Woolfolk, *East Bay Times*, March 19, 2023, pp. E1-E2

### **The Cool Factor**

From earlier in this essay,

**There is a plethora of unorganized, unprioritized news** on the Internet (online) and on social media that not only does not help us to be efficiently informed on **relevant** issues we vote on in our own city, region, and state but impedes us from doing so with sexy, titillating, and distracting news feeds tailored to get us to click and buy. The fundamental orientation of free Internet (online) news is to get you to click and buy. At any second, you can easily click on many other links, so these free, online news websites are heavy on sexy, titillating items so they and their advertisers don't lose you to another website.

In contrast, the fundamental orientation of print newspapers (and their electronic replicas) is to provide you with quality, relevant information so you can vote knowledgeably where you live. You pay for a 52-week subscription once a year (you click once a year). During this year, their staff concentrates on keeping you informed in a responsible and efficient manner, without being preoccupied with where you might click in the next few seconds.

So, given that free Internet news is not conducive to being an informed citizen in a time-efficient manner where you vote and that print newspapers are, why do print newspapers continue to experience such a steep decline? I think that one cause of this decline is the “**cool factor**” or, more specifically, the “**tech cool**



**factor.”** People like to feel they are in step with the times and not obsolete. We live in a “tech”-permeated world, and people like to feel that they are “tech”, especially if their educational background is not “tech.” They feel that reading print newspapers is **not** “tech.”

I talk to a range of people in our community about how to stay efficiently informed to vote knowledgeably where we live in the face of a such a growing plethora of unorganized, unprioritized news on the Internet (online). When I tell them I get this information primarily from print newspapers, they look at me with **disdain** and reply with “tech pride” that they “get their news from the Internet”. I get this reply often from semi-literate people I talk to about these issues.

## **Conclusion**

**Free Internet (online) news, including that on social media, is fundamentally unsuited for a democratic society.**

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January 29, 2024