

The news will manage without you

A short book about checking the headlines many times a day and feeling worse informed and more afraid

unbry · Free to read, yours to keep

<https://unbry.com/read/the-news-will-manage-without-you>

First edition

Written by AI with human guidance. It can contain mistakes, which later editions correct.

Contents

1. Before you start
2. Monday, ten past seven
3. Why you keep looking
4. "I need to know what's going on"
5. "It's how I stay safe"
6. "A responsible person keeps up"
7. "It doesn't affect me"
8. "I like to know what people are saying"
9. "When something big happens, I have to follow it"
10. "Watching is the least I can do"
11. "I'd be the last to know"
12. "It's only a quick look"
13. What checking costs you
14. What it costs the people around you
15. What being informed looks like
16. The decision
17. Elections, emergencies and other hard cases
18. Monday again
19. Notes

Before you start

This is a short book and you can read it in two or three sittings. It's about one habit. You look at the news many times a day. You look on your phone before you're out of bed, at the kettle, on the train, between tasks at work, and last thing at night. There may be a radio bulletin on the hour and the television news in the evening as well. You'd say you like to keep up. If you're honest, most of it leaves you uneasy, and at the end of the week you couldn't say much about what you'd learned.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that the habit is understandable. Human attention is drawn to threat, the news is built to supply it, and wanting to be informed is a decent thing to want. The second is that frequent checking doesn't deliver what it promises. It makes you feel informed without informing you much, it gives you a less accurate picture of your own risks, and it raises your anxiety in ways that have been measured. The third is practical. You take in the news once a day, at a time and from a source you've chosen, and then you close it. Chapters 14 to 16 cover how.

Nothing in this book says that the events in the news don't matter, or that caring about them is a mistake. Wars, elections and disasters are real, and the people in them are real. I'm also not recommending that you ignore the news altogether. People who do that end up knowing less, and I'll give the evidence. The argument is about how often you look and in what form, and whether the twenty-fifth look of the day does anything for you or for anybody else.

Three cautions.

If you feel anxious most days, find it hard to control your worrying, and it's affecting your sleep, your work or your relationships, that may be more than a news habit. The NHS advice is to see a GP if you think you might have generalised anxiety disorder. In England you can also refer yourself directly to an NHS talking therapies service. Cutting down on news may help, but it isn't a treatment.

If the news is about you, this book applies differently. You may have family in a war zone, or live where the floods are. The story may be about your industry or your own community. If so, you have real reasons to follow events closely, and chapter 16 has a section on that.

And if your low mood or fear has reached the point where you've thought of harming yourself, please seek help now. Call 111, or 999 in an emergency. The Samaritans are on 116 123 at any hour.

The notes at the back give my sources and their limits. Where I'm giving my own reasoning and not a finding, I'll say so.

Monday, ten past seven

It's ten past seven on a Monday morning and the alarm has just gone. Before your feet touch the floor you've picked up the phone, and before you've decided anything your thumb has opened the news. There's been a missile strike on a city whose name you couldn't have placed a year ago. Someone has been stabbed outside a nightclub in a town two hundred miles away. A minister is under pressure to resign. Economists are warning about the winter.

You read the first few lines of each and put the phone down. You get up with a faint tightness in your chest, which you don't connect with anything.

At the kettle you look again. The minister story has a new headline, which says the pressure is mounting. On the train you look twice. At your desk there's a tab that stays open all day, and you glance at it between tasks, perhaps once or twice an hour. There's a live page running on the missile strike, with a new entry every few minutes. Most of the entries say that details are still emerging. At lunch you read an opinion piece that makes you angry and another that makes you gloomy. In the car on the way home the radio gives you the headlines at five, half past five and six. You watch the ten o'clock news, which tells you what you already know, with pictures. In bed you look once more, in case anything has happened since the television told you what had happened.

If you counted, it would come to something like twenty-five looks. You've never counted.

Your partner Jo said at dinner, "You've gone quiet again." You said you were fine. You were thinking about the winter, and the economists.

Sunday had been a good day until about four o'clock. You'd been in the garden with the phone left indoors. You came in for a cup of tea, picked the phone up, and within two minutes the afternoon felt different. Nothing in your life had changed, and the garden hadn't either.

Your brother-in-law Neil doesn't look at the news during the week. He gets a weekly paper on Saturdays and reads it over the weekend with a pot of coffee. It's slightly annoying that when the family talks about what's going on in the world, Neil tends to know more about it than you do.

You'd call yourself well informed. You'd say that it's part of being a responsible adult to keep up, and you may think a little less of people who don't. You wouldn't say that you enjoy it.

I'll use a few terms throughout. **Checking** is looking at the news without having decided to find out anything in particular. **The feed** is wherever your headlines come from, whether that's an app, a website, a social network, rolling television or the radio on the hour. **The jolt** is the small alarm you feel on reading a bad headline. **An update** is a new headline on a story you already know about, which usually adds little. **Being informed** means understanding something well enough to explain it to someone else or to act on it. **The appointment** is a fixed time at which you take in the news on purpose, and it's what this book builds towards.

The habit has some regular features. This list is my own observation and not a research finding.

Nothing prompts it. You don't check because you want to know a particular thing. You check because it's there and a few minutes have passed.

You mostly read headlines. Most looks last under a minute and take in headlines and first paragraphs. You seldom read anything to the end.

It's repetitive. Most of what you see at four o'clock is what you saw at one, reworded.

It's mostly about things far away that you can do nothing about.

And it leaves a residue. Each look is trivial, and the day's total is a mood.

Try one thing before reading on. For two days, keep a tally of every time you look at the news in any form, including radio and television bulletins. At the end of each day, write down in a few lines what you learned that you didn't know the day before. Then note whether you did anything, or will do anything, as a result. Most people who try this get a larger tally than they expected and find they've written only a few lines.

Why you keep looking

If the tally was high, you might be inclined to call it an addiction or a weakness. I'd call it the expected result of a particular kind of mind meeting a particular kind of product.

Start with the mind. People pay more attention to bad news than to good, and react to it more strongly. This has been measured in the body as well as in surveys. Stuart Soroka, Patrick Fournier and Lilach Nir showed real television news stories to people in seventeen countries on six continents while recording their skin conductance and heart rate, which change when a person is aroused or alert. On average, people reacted more strongly to negative stories than to positive ones, and that held across the very different cultures they tested. The researchers also found a good deal of variation between individuals, so some people have the bias more strongly than others.

It's easy to see why a mind would be built like that. For most of human history, the cost of missing a threat was far higher than the cost of missing an opportunity. If you ignore a rustle in the grass that turns out to be nothing, you've lost a second. If you ignore one that turns out to be a snake, you may have lost your life. You're descended from the people who looked.

Now the product. News organisations have always known that bad news sells, and they can now measure it to the decimal point. Claire Robertson and colleagues analysed a very large set of experiments run by a news website, in which different headlines for the same story were shown to different readers at random to

see which got more clicks. There were about 105,000 headline variations and several hundred million views. For a headline of average length, each additional negative word raised the rate at which people clicked by 2.3 per cent. Positive words lowered it.

No conspiracy is needed to explain what follows. Editors choose the stories and headlines that people will read, and people read the alarming ones. Apps send the notifications that get opened, and the alarming ones get opened. The news shows you a selection of what happened, and the selection is made, quite mechanically, by what frightens you.

Add the way the product is delivered. A newspaper had an end. You read it and you'd finished. A feed has no end and is never the same twice, so there's always a reason to look again. Every look might turn up something new, and occasionally it does, which is the pattern that makes any checking habit hard to shake. I've described that mechanism in another book in this series, on phones, and won't repeat it here.

Then there are your own reasons, which are good ones.

You want to be a responsible citizen. You vote, you have opinions, and you think people ought to know what's being done in their name.

You want to be safe and prepared. If something's coming, you'd like to see it coming.

You want to be able to take part. When people talk about what's happening, you don't want to be the one who hasn't heard.

And when the world feels uncertain, looking feels like a way of getting a grip on it.

Underneath these are needs nobody should be ashamed of. You want to understand the world, to be safe in it, to do your part, and to belong in the conversation. The question for the next several chapters is whether checking serves those needs. I'll argue that it serves each of them worse than looking once a day would, and that it does the first two active harm.

"I need to know what's going on"

The main justification for checking is that it keeps you informed. It's what informed people do. If you stopped, you'd fall behind and lose your grip on events.

So look at what a day of checking put into your head. Take the Monday in chapter 1. By bedtime you'd looked about twenty-five times. You knew there'd been a missile strike, which you knew at ten past seven. You knew the minister was under pressure, which you also knew at ten past seven. The twenty-three looks in between delivered rewordings. The pressure was mounting, then growing, and then colleagues were said to be rallying round. The live page delivered several dozen entries to the effect that details were still emerging. Your understanding of why the strike happened, what the minister is accused of, or what the economists' warning rests on, was about the same at bedtime as at breakfast.

That's because of what an update is. When an event is only hours old, very little is known about it, and much of what's reported early turns out to be incomplete or wrong. Casualty figures change, motives are guessed at and corrected, and the first account of who did what is often revised by the following day. The hourly headline is the least checked and least digested form of news there is. It tells you that something is happening. Explanation comes later and at greater length.

There's a test for whether you're being informed, and I'd encourage you to try it on Friday. Without looking anything up, write down what you remember of Monday's news. For each item, write what's

happened since and why it matters. Most people who check constantly find this surprisingly hard. The week's headlines have run together, and what's left is a general sense that things are bad, with little you could call knowledge.

Compare Neil, with his weekly paper and his pot of coffee. By Saturday the week's events have been sorted by people whose job it is. The stories that turned out not to matter have dropped away, and the ones that did matter have been explained, with background, by someone who's had a few days to find out what happened. Neil spends perhaps two hours a week on the news and gets an account with a beginning, a middle and some context. You spend an hour a day or more and get headlines.

I don't want to overstate this. You do pick up something from headlines, and you'd recognise more names and events than somebody who saw no news at all. Recognising the names of things is a thin kind of knowledge, though. You could give a good account of how the minister story made you feel on Monday, but a much poorer one of what the minister had actually done.

There's research that fits with this. Homero Gil de Zúñiga and colleagues followed a panel of American adults over time and measured what they knew about politics. People who relied on news reaching them through their social feeds, without seeking it out, knew less than others, and they fell further behind as time went on. The researchers concluded that news improves political knowledge best when it's actively sought. Their study was about people who don't look for news at all, which isn't your problem. But the conclusion applies to you as well. You learn when you sit down

intending to find something out. You learn much less when headlines are simply passing in front of you, whether that's twice a day or twenty-five times.

So I'm not suggesting you should know less. Once a day, and on purpose, you'd learn as much as you do now, and probably more, because you'd be reading to understand something.

"It's how I stay safe"

Part of the pull of the news is protective. The world has dangers in it, and keeping an eye on them feels like basic prudence. If you know about the stabbing, the scam, the outbreak and the storm, you can take care.

For a small class of news this is true, and I'll set it aside now. A weather warning for your area, a road closure on your route, a product recall for something in your cupboard, or a public health notice that applies to you are all information with an action attached. You should have them, and chapter 15 makes room for them. They make up a very small share of what you see in a day.

For the rest, consider how a story gets into the news. It gets in by being unusual. A stabbing outside a nightclub two hundred miles away is reported because such things are rare enough to be notable. The events that are most likely to harm you are common, and common things aren't news. The leading causes of death and injury for someone like you are heart disease, cancer, falls and road accidents close to home. None of those will be in tomorrow's headlines, because they happen every day.

So the news is a systematically poor guide to your own risks. It shows you a great many vivid examples of rare dangers and almost none of the common ones, and your mind does what minds do with vivid examples. It treats them as frequent.

There's clear evidence of this from England and Wales. The Crime Survey, which asks tens of thousands of people each year about their actual experience of crime, shows that crime measured that way fell substantially from a peak in 1995. Throughout that fall, the same survey asked people whether they thought crime in the country as a whole was going up or down. Year after year, most people said it was going up. The Office for National Statistics, which runs the survey, puts it bluntly. People's perceptions of crime at a national level don't typically match reality.

The same report contains a second finding that I think is even more telling. When people were asked about crime in their own local area, their answers matched reality much better. People in high-crime areas knew it, and people in low-crime areas knew that too. The statisticians' explanation is that people have direct knowledge of what happens locally.

Put those two findings together. Where people rely on their own eyes, they judge the risks well. For the country as a whole they have to rely on the news, and there they were wrong for twenty years, always in the direction of more fear. The more of that kind of reporting a person takes in, the more confidently mistaken they're likely to be.

This matters for how you live. Someone who believes the country is getting steadily more dangerous makes different choices. They go out less in the evening, trust strangers less, let their children do less, and feel a background dread that has no counterpart in their own street. They're paying these costs for the sake of safety, and they're no safer for it.

If safety is what you're after, I'd suggest you get more of it from the dull sources. Your GP can tell you about your real risks. The Met Office can tell you about the weather, and the council about the road. If you want to know how the country is doing on crime, health or the economy, the annual statistics will tell you far more than a year of headlines, and you can read them in twenty minutes.

"A responsible person keeps up"

This is the belief that gives the habit its respectability. In a democracy, citizens ought to know what's going on. People who don't follow the news are part of the problem. You may have been brought up in a house where the six o'clock news was watched in silence, and where being well informed was a mark of seriousness.

I agree with the principle. A society works better when people understand the issues, vote with some knowledge, and notice when those in power misbehave. If I thought the alternative to checking was ignorance, I'd tell you to carry on.

But look at what citizenship asks of you in practice. It asks you to vote every few years, with a reasonable grasp of what the parties propose and how the last lot performed. It asks you to form views on the large questions, which change slowly. It might ask you to write to your MP about something you care about, give money or time to a cause, serve on a jury, or turn up at a local meeting. It asks you to talk to other people about public matters in a way that sheds some light.

None of those is improved by the twenty-fourth look of the day. Your vote at the next election will be no wiser because you read on Monday afternoon that pressure on the minister was mounting. The large questions are better understood through one long article than through a hundred headlines. And good conversation about public affairs comes from people who've thought about a subject. Having been alarmed by it many times doesn't help.

I think something subtler is going on as well, and this is my interpretation. Checking produces a feeling of participation. When you've followed a story all day, you feel involved in it, as though your attention were a contribution. It's a bit like the feeling of having dealt with your email, when all you've done is read it. Reading about a famine isn't doing anything about the famine. The feeling can even stand in for action. Someone who's spent an hour absorbing bad news has the sense of having done their civic duty for the day, and is less likely, not more, to do the ten-minute thing that would make a small difference.

You're also far from alone in finding the volume too much. The Reuters Institute at Oxford surveys news habits in dozens of countries every year. In its 2026 report, 42 per cent of people said they sometimes or often avoid the news, up from 29 per cent in 2017. Many of them are conscientious people who've found that the way news now arrives is bad for them. The institute regards this as a problem for democracy, and if it means people switching off entirely, I agree. It's a reason to find a way of keeping up that a person can sustain.

Responsible citizenship can be measured by what you understand and what you do. On both counts, one deliberate session a day beats twenty-five glances, and a weekly read like Neil's probably beats both.

"It doesn't affect me"

You may accept that checking teaches you little and still think it's harmless. You're an adult. You've been reading bad news all your life. A headline about a distant war is sad, and then you get on with your day. You're not one of those people who get upset by the news.

Psychologists have tested this, and the results are consistent enough to take seriously.

The classic experiment was run in the 1990s by Johnston and Davey at the University of Sussex. They put together three versions of a fourteen-minute television news bulletin from real broadcast material. One was made up of negative stories, one of positive stories and one of neutral ones. Volunteers were assigned to watch one of the three. Those who watched the negative bulletin came out measurably more anxious and sadder than the others, which is no surprise. The second result is the interesting one. Before and after the bulletin, the researchers asked people about a worry from their own life, something personal that had nothing to do with the news. After the negative bulletin, people were more inclined to catastrophise about their own worry, meaning that they spun it out further towards worse and worse outcomes.

So the effect of bad news isn't confined to its subject. A report about a war doesn't just make you sad about the war. It lowers your mood, and the lowered mood then colours whatever else is on your mind, your job, your health, your children, the winter. This is the tightness in the chest on Monday morning that you didn't connect with anything.

You might say that fourteen minutes of solid bad news is more than a glance at a phone. A more recent experiment used much smaller doses. During the pandemic, Kathryn Buchanan and colleagues had people spend just two to four minutes looking at a social media feed of Covid news, or watching a short video about it, while a comparison group saw nothing of the kind. Those few minutes produced an immediate, measurable drop in positive mood, and in one of the studies a drop in optimism as well. A third group, who were shown stories of people being kind to each other during the pandemic, didn't suffer the drop.

Two to four minutes is about the length of one of your looks, and you have twenty-five of them in a day.

I'm not claiming that each one ruins your day. The effect of each is small, which is why you don't notice it. But they're spread across the day at intervals that never let the mood fully recover. It's the residue I described in chapter 1. Each look leaves a trace, and the traces add up to a mood.

People who say the news doesn't affect them are usually reporting, accurately, that they don't feel a strong emotion when they read a headline. The experiments don't measure strong emotions. They measure a small downward shift and a greater readiness to worry. You wouldn't notice those in yourself any more than you'd notice the room getting slightly colder. You might only notice that you've gone quiet at dinner.

You can run a fair test on yourself. On two comparable days, rate your mood out of ten at lunch and at bedtime. On one of the days, check as normal. On the other, don't look at any news until the

evening. See whether the numbers differ.

"I like to know what people are saying"

A good share of what you read isn't news in the strict sense. It's reaction to news. That covers the opinion column, the furious thread, the clip of one politician attacking another, and the comments underneath. On Monday you read one piece at lunch that made you angry and another that made you gloomy. You might defend this as hearing all sides. You like to know what people are saying and how the argument is going.

The argument is worth knowing, in moderation. A good column by someone who knows the subject can clarify an issue in ten minutes. What I'd question is the kind of opinion that reaches you, because it's selected even more ruthlessly than the news itself.

Steve Rathje, Jay Van Bavel and Sander van der Linden analysed 2.7 million posts on two large social networks, from news organisations and American politicians. They wanted to know what made a post spread. The strongest predictor by far was whether it was about the other side. Posts about the political opposition were shared about twice as often as posts about the poster's own side. Each additional word referring to the opposing group raised the odds of a post being shared by 67 per cent. That effect was several times stronger than the effect of negative language in general. Posts about the opposition mostly drew angry reactions.

An earlier study by William Brady and colleagues looked at more than half a million messages about three divisive political issues. Each additional word that was both moral and emotional, words

such as "shameful" or "evil", increased a message's spread by about 20 per cent. The spread was mostly within one political camp and seldom crossed to the other.

So the commentary that finds its way to you has passed through a filter that favours anger at opponents, expressed in the language of moral outrage, and circulated among people who already agree. It isn't a sample of what people are saying. It's the output of a system that promotes whatever makes people furious. The reasonable majority, who think the issue is complicated and the other side not wholly wicked, produce little that travels.

This affects your picture of your fellow citizens. If the other side is known to you mainly through its most enraging members, as selected and relayed by your own side, you'll conclude that they're stupider and nastier than they are. They're concluding the same about you, from the same kind of evidence. It's the crime survey finding from chapter 4 again, applied to people instead of crime. Your judgement of the people you meet is fairly accurate, while your judgement of the people you only read about has been distorted.

It affects your mood as well, in a way that's different from the jolt. Anger is more energising than fear, and for a few minutes it can feel good. It feels like clarity and like being on the right side. Then it leaves you stirred up with nowhere to put it. You've had an argument in your head with someone who'll never hear it. The lunchtime column that made you angry took twenty minutes to read and cost you the first hour of the afternoon.

The rule in chapter 15 doesn't exclude opinion. If there are two or three commentators whose judgement you've come to trust, including at least one you often disagree with, read them, at length, in your weekly session. What the rule removes is the constant drip of other people's fury, which tells you very little about what your neighbours think.

"When something big happens, I have to follow it"

Ordinary days are one thing. When something enormous happens, such as an attack, a disaster or a war breaking out, it seems natural and even right to follow it hour by hour. Everyone does. It would feel callous to carry on as normal, and you want to understand what's happened.

These are the occasions when heavy news consumption has been most carefully studied, and the findings are some of the most striking in this book.

In April 2013 two bombs went off at the finish line of the Boston Marathon. In the weeks afterwards, Alison Holman, Dana Rose Garfin and Roxane Cohen Silver surveyed representative samples of nearly 4,700 Americans, including people in Boston, people in New York and people across the rest of the country. They asked about symptoms of acute stress, such as intrusive thoughts, feeling on edge and avoiding reminders. They asked whether people had been directly exposed to the bombing, by being there or being close to someone who was. And they asked how many hours a day of bombing-related media each person had taken in during the following week. Because the participants belonged to an existing survey panel, the researchers also had measures of their mental health from before the bombing.

People who'd consumed six or more hours a day of bombing coverage reported higher acute stress than people who'd been directly exposed to the bombing itself. That held after allowing for their mental health beforehand.

I should put the limits on that. It's a survey, so it can't prove the coverage caused the stress. It may be that people who were more distressed sought out more coverage, and the researchers think that's part of the story. In a follow-up that tracked more than four thousand people for three years, they found a cycle. Heavy media exposure to the bombing predicted more post-traumatic stress symptoms six months later. Those symptoms predicted more worry about future events. And that worry predicted heavier media consumption, and more acute stress, when the next atrocity came, which was the Orlando nightclub shooting in 2016. Following one event hour by hour seemed to leave people more vulnerable to the next.

Think about what following a big event involves. The same footage is played again and again. You might see the worst thirty seconds of somebody's life forty times in a day. Someone who was really there saw it once. The coverage goes on long after there's anything new to say, because the audience is there. And in the first hours and days, as chapter 3 said, very little is known. It's the period of wrong numbers, false leads and speculation by people filling airtime. When you follow hour by hour, you're taking in the most distressing material at the time when it's least informative.

The World Health Organization drew a practical conclusion from this kind of research at the start of the Covid pandemic. Its advice to the public was to minimise news that caused anxiety or distress, to seek information mainly in order to take practical steps, and to seek updates at specific times during the day, once or twice. It added that the sudden and near-constant stream of news reports about an outbreak can cause anyone to feel worried.

Once or twice a day was the advice of the world's health authority during the largest news event of our lifetimes. If it was enough for a pandemic that did affect your daily life, it's enough for a crisis in a country you've never visited.

Turning the coverage off doesn't mean you don't care. The people at the centre of a disaster aren't helped by the number of hours you watch. The next chapter is about what does help.

"Watching is the least I can do"

There's a moral feeling tied up in all this, and it deserves to be taken seriously. Terrible things are happening to people. You're safe and comfortable. To look away feels like a small betrayal, as though the decent response to suffering is at least to witness it. If people are living through a war, you feel you can at least read about it.

I respect the impulse. It comes from conscience. Wanting to help is right, but watching isn't a way of doing it.

Ask what your attention does for the people in the story. A family sheltering in a basement isn't made safer, warmer or less afraid by your reading the live page for the sixth time today. Nobody in the story knows that you're watching. Your distress on their behalf, however real, never reaches them. The feeling that attention is a form of solidarity is sincere, but nothing passes from you to them.

What does reach people is money, time, votes and voices. A donation to an organisation working in the area does something. A standing order does more, because relief agencies can plan around steady income. A letter to your MP does a little, and more if many people write. Volunteering for a local charity that helps refugees or the homeless does a great deal for a few people. Hosting, fostering, mentoring, giving blood, serving as a school governor or a trustee are all ways in which a private citizen can make some part of the world better. All of them have a cost in time and attention, and you have a limited supply of both.

This is where heavy checking works against your conscience. It uses up the hours and the emotional energy that action would need. An evening spent absorbing four crises leaves you drained and low, with a sense that everything is hopeless, and that's a poor state in which to do anything. People in that state rarely get round to setting up the standing order. It's my interpretation and not a research finding, but I think the checking habit takes a fund of real goodwill and spends it on feeling bad.

The news also presents so many causes, so briefly, that none of them gets your sustained concern. There's a famine one week, an earthquake the next, and a scandal after that. Each one produces a jolt of sympathy, and then the next story replaces it. Someone who picks one or two causes and sticks with them for years, learning about them and giving to them regularly, does far more good than someone who feels terrible about forty.

So here's a suggestion that I think honours the impulse better than watching does. Choose one or two things in the world that you care about most. Find out which organisations do good work on them. Give them something regular, whether money or time. Follow those subjects properly, through the organisations' own reports and the occasional long article. Then, when the feeling comes that you ought to be paying attention to the suffering in the world, you'll know you're already doing something that reaches some of it. That's more than looking away, and more than the live page.

"I'd be the last to know"

There's a social fear underneath the habit too. If you stopped checking, something important would happen and you wouldn't know. You'd walk into work and everyone would be talking about it. Someone would say "haven't you heard?" and you'd look foolish, or uncaring. In the worst case, something would happen that affected you, and you'd find out too late.

Take the practical fear first, because it's the easier one. Think back over the last ten years and try to list the news events that required you, personally, to do something within hours. There may have been a storm warning, or a lockdown announcement, or a transport strike on your line. The list is short. Every item on it would have reached you anyway, through a text from a friend, a word from a colleague, an email from your employer or a government alert on your phone. News that really does affect you doesn't need you to go looking for it. It travels through people, and you're surrounded by them.

I should be careful here, because chapter 3 cited research showing that people who rely on news finding them end up knowing less about public affairs. The two points are compatible. If you wait for news to find you, you won't end up understanding the world, which is why this book recommends a daily appointment and not a blackout. But the single enormous event will reach you within the hour, however little you check. It always has. Your grandparents heard about the outbreak of war without a phone.

As for the social fear, picture the scene. You arrive at work and a colleague says, "Did you see about the minister?" You say, "No, what's happened?" The colleague tells you, with some relish, because people enjoy being the one to tell. It costs you nothing. It's a rather better conversation than the one in which you both already know and have nothing to exchange but sighs. Nobody thinks less of a person for not having seen a headline that's three hours old. And by the evening, after your appointment, you'll know about it anyway, and perhaps in more depth than the colleague does.

Look at what the fear of being last buys you. In exchange for twenty-five looks a day, you learn about events a few hours sooner than you otherwise would. Ask what those few hours are worth. For almost every story, it makes no practical difference whether you learn about it at eleven in the morning or at six in the evening. The missile strike on Monday would have been just as real, and you'd have been just as unable to affect it, if you'd read about it at six. Being among the first to know about something you can't influence isn't worth the mood of the whole day.

Neil, I'd point out, is sometimes the last to know by a margin of several days. It doesn't seem to have damaged him socially. He says "I haven't caught up with that yet, tell me", and people tell him.

"It's only a quick look"

Each individual look is nothing. It takes thirty seconds at the kettle or a minute on the platform. You're hardly going to be harmed by a minute. This is what makes the habit hard to see, and it's the same for most habits in this series. No single instance is worth worrying about.

So do the arithmetic once. There were twenty-five looks on Monday. Some were thirty seconds, but the lunchtime one was twenty minutes and the evening bulletin was half an hour. A fair total is somewhere between an hour and an hour and a half a day. That's seven to ten hours a week, which is a working day, spent on something you don't enjoy and don't learn much from. Neil's weekend read takes two.

The time is the smaller cost, though. The larger one is what a look does to the minutes around it.

Each look is a small interruption to whatever you were doing or thinking. When you glance at the open tab between tasks at work, your attention doesn't return at once to where it was. Part of it stays with the headline for a while. If the headline carried a jolt, more of it stays. A day with twenty-five such interruptions in it is a day in which your attention is never quite whole.

Two of the looks deserve particular mention, because of when they happen.

The first is the one before you're out of bed. At ten past seven your mind is as calm as it'll be all day. It hasn't yet taken on the day's concerns. The first thing you give it is a missile strike, a stabbing, a scandal and a warning. You've chosen to begin the day with the jolt, and it sets your mood for the morning. It also sets the pattern, because a day that begins with checking tends to continue with it.

The second is the one last thing at night. Sleep comes most easily to a mind that's winding down. At eleven o'clock you give yours a final round of alarm to process in the dark. If you lie awake thinking about the winter and the economists, or wake at three with a vague sense of threat, the look in bed may be part of the reason.

Like the other habits in this series, the quick look runs on cues and not on decisions. The cues are the phone in your hand, a pause, a moment of boredom, the kettle, the platform, the advert break. You don't decide to check, any more than you decide to scratch an itch. That's good news in one respect, because cue-driven habits weaken quickly when the cues are changed. If the news app isn't on your home screen, the tab isn't open, and the phone isn't by the bed, most of the twenty-five looks won't occur to you. Chapter 15 makes use of that.

What checking costs you

The last few chapters took the beliefs one at a time. This one adds up the bill.

You're paying in mood. On the evidence of chapter 6, each dose of bad news leaves you a little lower and more inclined to worry, and your day contains twenty-five doses. The mood you've come to think of as your normal temperament, a bit anxious and gloomy and braced for something, may be in part an effect of what you're reading.

There's a recent survey that bears on this. Bryan McLaughlin and colleagues surveyed a national sample of American adults about their relationship with the news. They identified a group whose news consumption they called problematic, which meant they became absorbed in it, were preoccupied by it, checked compulsively, and found it interfering with their lives. That group reported markedly worse mental and physical health than others. The difference held after allowing for personality and, importantly, for how much news people consumed overall. What mattered was whether the consuming had become compulsive. It was a survey, so it can't show what causes what. Anxious and unwell people may be drawn to the news as much as the news makes people anxious and unwell. Holman and Silver's work suggests that both are true and that they feed each other.

You're paying in accuracy. Chapter 4 showed that a steady diet of news makes people confidently wrong about their own risks and about the direction of their country. There's an old idea in media

research, associated with George Gerbner, that people who watch a great deal of television come to see the world as a meaner and more dangerous place than it is. I'm giving that from memory of his work and not from a paper I've checked. The crime survey evidence points the same way. You're paying an hour a day to have a less accurate picture of the world.

You're paying in attention, as the last chapter described, and in sleep.

You're paying in presence. When Jo said "you've gone quiet again" at dinner, you were there in the room with your mind on the winter. The Sunday in the garden was a good afternoon, and two minutes on the phone ended it. Your own life is mostly made of things that are going reasonably well, such as a garden, a dinner, a person across the table. The news takes your attention off those and puts it on things that are going badly somewhere else. You can do something about your own life and nothing about most of the news, and you've been giving your attention to the news.

And you're paying in hope. A person who takes in forty pieces of bad news a day and almost no good news forms a view that everything is getting worse. Some things are. Many aren't. Across the last few decades, to take large examples, deaths of children under five have fallen enormously worldwide, and so has extreme poverty. Those are among the biggest stories of our lifetimes, and they're almost never in the headlines, because they happened slowly and nobody could put a date on them. I'm not telling you the world is fine. But you can't assess it from a selection made by what frightens you, and a settled belief that everything is hopeless has never helped anyone to improve anything.

I should put the other side. You have had things from the news. You know the names and the outlines, you can hold your own in conversation, and you haven't buried your head. Those are worth having. The argument of this book is that you can have all of them for a fraction of the price.

What it costs the people around you

A news habit seems like the most private of vices. It's you and a screen, and it's hard to see how it could affect anyone else. But other people are affected, in three ways.

The first is that moods are shared. When you come to breakfast with the tightness in your chest, the people at the table get a quieter, tenser version of you. They don't know why. Jo has noticed that you go quiet, and has probably wondered whether it's something she's done. A household takes its emotional weather from the people in it. If one of them is carrying a low, steady dread about events in other countries, everyone else lives with it too.

The second is that you pass the jolt on. "Have you seen what's happened?" is how a good deal of bad news travels. You read something alarming and you tell the nearest person, because alarm wants company. Now they're carrying it too. They can't do anything about it either. If you do this several times a day, you become a news feed for your household, delivering the headlines to people who hadn't chosen to look. Some families end up passing the same dread back and forth all evening. I'd suggest asking yourself, before you share a headline, whether the other person needs to know it or whether you just need to say it.

The third concerns children. If there are children in the house, they hear more than you think. The radio bulletin in the car, the television in the corner and the conversation over their heads about how terrible everything is all reach them. They haven't got an adult's sense of distance and proportion. A child who hears

about a war doesn't know that it's two thousand miles away, or what two thousand miles means. A child who overhears daily that the world is dangerous and getting worse has no means of checking that, and may simply believe it. I haven't looked into the research on children and news exposure, so take this as a parent's common sense. Children are better off hearing about frightening events from you, calmly, in terms they can manage, than picking them up from rolling coverage.

The news also takes the place of other things in a household. An hour a day of checking is an hour in which you aren't talking to the people you live with about their day or yours. At dinner you're quiet, and afterwards you spend the evening on the phone. The minister's difficulties have had more of your attention this week than your partner's have. I don't think anyone would choose that ordering if it were put to them directly.

What being informed looks like

If checking isn't the way to be informed, it's fair to ask what is. This chapter describes the alternative, and it's my own view, offered as one reasonable way of doing it.

Being informed, as I defined it in chapter 1, means understanding something well enough to explain it or act on it. Four things tend to produce that kind of understanding, and headlines supply none of them.

The first is time. An account written a day, a week or a month after an event is almost always better than one written an hour after. The facts have settled, the wrong early reports have been corrected, and someone has had time to find out why it happened. A daily newspaper or an evening bulletin is better than a live page for this reason, and a weekly is better than a daily. For the large questions, a good book written years later is best of all.

The second is length. Understanding needs background, such as who these people are, what happened before, what the competing explanations are, and what's likely to follow. That takes a thousand words or more, and a headline with two paragraphs under it can't do it. One long article on the conflict behind Monday's missile strike would tell you more than a month of updates.

The third is an ending. A newspaper, a magazine, a bulletin and a newsletter all stop. Somebody has decided what matters today and left the rest out, and when you reach the end, you've finished. A

feed never gives you that. It also can't tell you what matters, because it's arranged by what's newest and what gets clicked. Part of what you pay an editor for is deciding what to leave out.

The fourth is selection on your part. Nobody can understand everything. Informed people tend to follow a few subjects properly and keep a light general awareness of the rest. You might choose your own country's politics, one region of the world, and one issue you care about, such as climate or health or housing. For those, you read at length and over years, and you come to understand them. For everything else, the front page once a day is plenty.

Here's what that might look like in a week. It's an example and you should build your own.

Once a day, at a set time, you spend twenty minutes on a source that has an end. It might be the evening bulletin on the radio, a morning newsletter from a newspaper you trust, or the front few pages of a paper. When it's finished, you've finished.

Once a week, you read at length. It could be a weekly paper or magazine on a Saturday morning, as Neil does, or two or three long articles you've saved during the week.

Now and then you read a book about one of the subjects you follow.

For your own area, you keep the local sources that carry information you can act on. These are the council's notices, the weather, the school newsletter and the community group. As the crime survey showed, this is the level at which people's knowledge is most accurate and most useful.

And you keep one or two sources of the slow good news that headlines leave out. Several organisations publish long-run data on health, poverty, education and the environment. Looking at them two or three times a year will correct the picture that the daily selection gives you.

A person who did all of that would spend three or four hours a week on the news, against your present seven to ten. They'd understand more of what's going on and be better company when they talked about it. Their view of their own risks would be more accurate, and they'd be calmer.

The decision

Here's the rule I'm suggesting.

I take in the news once a day, at a time I've chosen, from a source that has an end. Then I close it.

It has seven parts.

Choose the time. Pick one slot in the day for the news and keep it. I'd avoid the first hour after waking and the last hour before bed, for the reasons in chapter 11. Early evening suits many people, as does the middle of the morning. Twenty to thirty minutes is enough.

Choose the source, and make it one that ends. A radio or television bulletin, a newspaper, a daily newsletter, or a news programme of fixed length all work. A website front page can work if you read down it once and stop. Social media feeds and live pages don't qualify, because they have no end and they're arranged by what alarms.

Then close it. When the bulletin finishes or you reach the bottom of the page, you've finished for the day. Whatever happens in the next twenty-three hours, you'll hear about tomorrow. If it's really enormous, someone will tell you, as chapter 10 argued.

Change the cues. Turn off news notifications on your phone, all of them. Move news apps off your home screen, or delete them and use the website during your appointment. Close the tab at work. Charge the phone outside the bedroom, and buy an alarm clock if

the phone is your alarm. If the radio in the car gives you the headlines every half hour, switch to music or something recorded. Each of these removes a cue, and without the cue most looks won't happen.

Keep the news you can act on. Weather warnings, travel disruption, school closures, government emergency alerts and notices from your council are useful information and don't count as checking. Let those through. They're few, and most of them can be set up as specific alerts and kept separate from the news app.

For a major event, allow a second appointment. If something very large happens, follow the World Health Organization's pandemic advice and look once or twice a day at set times. Read a considered summary, and avoid replaying the footage. The urge to follow hour by hour will be strong, and chapter 8 is the reason to resist it.

Once a week, read at length. Replace some of the time you've saved with the slower reading described in chapter 14, on the few subjects you've chosen to follow properly.

Plans of the "when this happens, then I'll do that" kind make a decision much more likely to survive the pull of a phone. Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran pooled 94 tests of such plans and found that they made people a good deal more likely to follow through. Here are three, which you can adapt.

When I pick up my phone in a spare moment and think of the news, then I'll put it down and look at whatever's in front of me for ten seconds.

When someone says "have you seen what's happened?", then I'll say "no, tell me", and I won't look it up afterwards.

When a big story breaks and I want to follow it live, then I'll wait for my appointment and read one full account.

You'll also need something for the gaps. The looks at the kettle, on the platform and in the queue were filling small empty moments, and those moments will still come. You don't have to fill them. A minute spent looking out of a train window does you no harm. If you'd like something in your hand, keep a book or a long article saved on your phone, so that what you reach for is something you chose. If the phone in general is the difficulty, and the news is only one of the things you check, there's a separate book in this series about that.

There's one more thing, which comes from chapter 9. Pick one cause, find one organisation, and set up one regular gift or commitment. Then the wish to do something about the state of the world has somewhere to go.

Here's what to expect, in my own estimate. For the first week your thumb will go to where the app was many times a day, and you'll feel a small itch each time, which passes in seconds. You'll have a recurring sense that something might be happening. Something will be, and you'll read about it at six. By the second or third week most people report feeling calmer in a way they hadn't expected, and they realise the background dread had been there so long they'd stopped noticing it. You'll slip, probably during a big story. When you notice you've been on a live page for forty minutes, close it, and keep your appointment the next day.

Elections, emergencies and other hard cases

If the news is about you. If your family is in the war zone, your town is the one flooding, or your job depends on the vote, then following events closely is a reasonable thing to do. It's still worth choosing how. Get your information from the most direct and practical sources available to you, such as official alerts, the relevant embassy or agency, and the people on the ground whom you know. Rolling coverage will give you more distress and less information than those. Set times for looking, even if there are six of them a day, so that there are also times when you aren't looking. Be alert to the cycle in chapter 8, because people close to an event are the most vulnerable to it.

If there's a local emergency. Follow the official sources, which are the police, the council, the Met Office, the Environment Agency and the NHS. Turn on government emergency alerts on your phone. These tell you what to do. National coverage of your local emergency mostly tells the rest of the country how bad it looks.

If it's an election. Elections reward understanding, and they're also when coverage is most feverish and least informative. The daily poll movements, gaffes and rows tell you almost nothing that will help you vote. What helps is an hour with the manifestos or a good summary of them, a look at your local candidates, and perhaps one long piece on each of the issues you care about. You can do that in an evening or two. On election night, by all means stay up if you enjoy it. If you do that, you're doing it for fun, and that's fine.

If the news is your job. Journalists, press officers, traders, politicians' staff and others need to follow events through the working day. Treat it as work. Do it at work, with the tools your job provides, and stop when work stops. People in these jobs often have the worst habits out of hours. The rule applies to your own time.

If politics is your hobby. Some people follow politics the way others follow football, for the drama and the characters, and they enjoy it. If that's you, and it really is a pleasure and not a compulsion, then carry on and count it as leisure. The test is how you feel afterwards. A hobby leaves you feeling better, and if an hour of political coverage usually leaves you angry and low, I'd question whether it's a hobby.

If someone you live with has the news on all day. You can't impose your rule on another adult. You can explain what you're doing and why, and ask for some news-free times and places, such as meals and the bedroom. You can wear headphones. Often the other person hasn't thought about it and is half relieved to be asked.

If the news is company. Many people who live alone keep rolling news or talk radio on through the day, for the voices. The wish for company is reasonable, and the trouble is only that this particular company talks about nothing but disasters. Music stations, drama, comedy, sport, podcasts and audiobooks all put human voices in the room without the dread. If the house is very quiet most days, that's worth attending to as well, and a phone call will do more for it than the news does.

If you get your news from social media. Then you're getting it in the form most heavily selected for alarm and outrage, with the least checking and with everybody's reactions attached. I'd suggest separating the two. Use social media, if you use it, for people you know and interests you've chosen, and mute or unfollow news accounts and the people who mainly repost bad news. Get your news from the source you've chosen for your appointment.

If you're worried about your health, and the news is about illness. Health scares are among the hardest stories to leave alone. For any health story, the practical question is whether there's something you should do, and the NHS website or your GP will answer that better than a headline. If you find yourself checking for symptoms or reading about a disease for hours, the habit is more than a news habit, and the advice in the preface about seeing a GP applies.

If you need to talk to children about the news. Tell them yourself, briefly and calmly, in words that suit their age. Answer their questions honestly and don't add detail they haven't asked for. Tell them where it's happening in terms they understand, and that the adults around them are keeping them safe. Keep rolling coverage off when they're in the room.

If you feel guilty for stepping back. Some people feel that being calm while others are suffering is itself a kind of wrong. I'd answer that your anxiety never helped anyone in the news. It costs you and the people around you a good deal and the sufferers get nothing from it. Go back to chapter 9 and put the feeling into one regular, practical commitment.

If the anxiety doesn't lift. If you've kept the rule for a month and you're still anxious most days, the news wasn't the main cause. See your GP or refer yourself to NHS talking therapies, as the preface said.

Monday again

It's a Monday some months on, and the alarm goes at ten past seven. It's a real alarm clock, a cheap one with a loud tick that you've got used to. The phone is downstairs on the hall table, where it spends the night. You lie there for a minute and think about the day. You've a meeting at ten that you're slightly dreading and a dentist's appointment at four, and you're having dinner with Jo's sister. Those are your concerns this morning, and they're about your own life.

At the kettle you look out of the window. On the train you've got a book, a long one about the history of the region where the missile strike was. You started it because you realised that after a year of headlines you couldn't have explained the conflict to a twelve-year-old. You're two hundred pages in, and you could now.

At work the tab isn't open. At about eleven a colleague says, "Did you see the minister's gone?" You say, "No, has he? What happened in the end?" She tells you, in some detail and with evident enjoyment. It takes three minutes and it's the best conversation you've had with her in weeks.

At six, when you get home, you put the radio on for the news programme while you start the dinner. It runs for half an hour. The minister has indeed gone, and a correspondent who's followed the affair for months spends four minutes explaining why. There's been an election abroad, and an interest rate decision. When the programme ends you turn the radio off. That's it for the day. Whatever happens tonight will be on tomorrow's programme.

The first fortnight was odd. Your thumb went to the empty space on the screen forty times a day. You felt, for a while, as if you'd left the gas on, with a low sense that something was happening and you ought to be watching it. Something was always happening, and at six you found out what. Nothing that happened in those two weeks required anything of you before six.

There've been slips. In the spring there was a terrible attack in a European city, and you spent most of one evening on a live page before you noticed what you were doing and the state you were in. You closed it. The next day you read one long account, which told you more than the whole evening had.

On Saturdays you read a weekly over a late breakfast. You and Neil have started swapping articles. You've got a standing order to a medical charity that works in the region you're reading about. It's not a large amount, but it goes every month.

Jo said something a few weeks ago. She said, "You're back." You asked what she meant, and she said she wasn't sure, only that you'd been somewhere else for a couple of years and now you were here.

The world hasn't improved since the spring, as far as you can judge. You're better informed about it than you were, and much less afraid. The news got on without you, and you understand it better than you did when you checked it all day.

Here's one action. Turn off the news notifications on your phone now, all of them. Then decide what time tomorrow you'll sit down with the news, and what you'll read.

Notes

This book gives general information. It isn't medical or psychological advice, and it's no substitute for a professional who knows your situation. NHS guidance is quoted as I found it in September 2026 and applies to England.

I've kept sources out of the chapters where I could so they read easily. Here they are by chapter, with the limits I'm aware of. Unless I say otherwise, I read the published summary of each paper and not the full text. I checked each paper for a retraction or correction notice in September 2026 and found none on the papers cited. Where a chapter isn't listed, it rests on my own reasoning. That includes chapters 1, 9, 11, 13, 14, 16 and 17. You, Jo, Neil and every other example are invented for illustration.

Before you start. The advice on generalised anxiety disorder and on self-referral to talking therapies is from the NHS page "Generalised anxiety disorder". The Samaritans' number is 116 123.

Chapter 2. Soroka, Fournier and Nir, "Cross-national evidence of a negativity bias in psychophysiological reactions to news", Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 116, 2019, pages 18888 to 18892. That the measures were skin conductance and heart rate is from my memory of the paper. Robertson, Pröllochs, Schwarzenegger, Pärnamets, Van Bavel and Feuerriegel, "Negativity drives online news consumption", Nature Human Behaviour 7, 2023, pages 812 to 822. The website was one that specialised in shareable, mostly upbeat stories, so its readers may

not be typical of news readers. The evolutionary account of why minds attend to threat is a common one and is speculation. The book on phones is "The phone can wait".

Chapter 3. Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks and Ardèvol-Abreu, "Effects of the news-finds-me perception in communication: social media use implications for news seeking and learning about politics", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 22, 2017, pages 105 to 123. That early reports of events are often wrong is a commonplace among journalists, and I haven't sourced it to a study. The Friday test is mine.

Chapter 4. Office for National Statistics, "Public perceptions of crime in England and Wales: year ending March 2016". The quotation that perceptions of crime at a national level don't typically match well to reality is from that report, as is the finding on local areas. I haven't checked more recent editions. The list of leading causes of death and injury is general knowledge from national statistics and isn't tied to a particular table. The Crime Survey's sample size is from memory.

Chapter 5. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, *Digital News Report 2026*, executive summary. The figure is an average across the markets surveyed. The idea that checking produces a feeling of participation that can stand in for action is mine.

Chapter 6. Johnston and Davey, "The psychological impact of negative TV news bulletins: the catastrophizing of personal worries", *British Journal of Psychology* 88, 1997, pages 85 to 91. The summary doesn't give the number of participants. Buchanan,

Aknin, Lotun and Sandstrom, "Brief exposure to social media during the COVID-19 pandemic: doom-scrolling has negative emotional consequences, but kindness-scrolling does not", PLoS One 16, 2021, article e0257728. That small effects add up across a day is my inference. Neither study tested it.

Chapter 7. Rathje, Van Bavel and van der Linden, "Out-group animosity drives engagement on social media", Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 118, 2021, article e2024292118. Brady, Wills, Jost, Tucker and Van Bavel, "Emotion shapes the diffusion of moralized content in social networks", Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 114, 2017, pages 7313 to 7318. The example words are mine. Both studies are of American politics. That this distorts people's view of their opponents is my inference from them, though other research I haven't cited here has found that partisans overestimate how extreme the other side is.

Chapter 8. Holman, Garfin and Silver, "Media's role in broadcasting acute stress following the Boston Marathon bombings", Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 111, 2014, pages 93 to 98. My description of what counted as direct exposure is from memory of the paper. Thompson, Jones, Holman and Silver, "Media exposure to mass violence events can fuel a cycle of distress", Science Advances 5, 2019, article eaav3502. World Health Organization, "Mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak", 18 March 2020. I read the document itself. The observation about replayed footage is mine.

Chapter 10. Gil de Zúñiga and colleagues as above. That very large events reach people quickly by word of mouth is my observation.

Chapter 12. McLaughlin, Gotlieb and Mills, "Caught in a dangerous world: problematic news consumption and its relationship to mental and physical ill-being", *Health Communication* 38, 2023, pages 2687 to 2697. George Gerbner's idea is usually called mean world syndrome, and I've given it from memory. The falls in child mortality and extreme poverty are reported by the United Nations and the World Bank. I've stated them from general knowledge and haven't checked the latest figures, and progress on poverty has slowed in recent years.

Chapter 15. Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis of effects and processes", *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 38, 2006, pages 69 to 119. The rule and its parts haven't been tested together, and what I say to expect is my expectation and not a finding.