

# Can't Stop Doomscrolling? It's Time for an Information Diet.



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The way we consume information has changed dramatically over the last months, which makes sense. With much of the real world off-limits thanks to the pandemic, our options for entertainment have largely become confined to what's available online. Dinners out with friends have been replaced by Zoom hangouts, and local sites like NextDoor have replaced chatting with our neighbors IRL.

But with our worlds so reliant on our devices and apps, it's harder than ever to log-off, leading many of us to take up a destructive new habit: Doomsurfing.

What exactly is doomsurfing? Kevin Roose, a tech columnist for the *New York Times*, wrote in March that, “I’ve been doing a lot of this kind of doomsurfing recently – falling into deep, morbid rabbit holes filled with coronavirus content, agitating myself to the point of physical discomfort, erasing any hope of a good night’s sleep. Maybe you have, too.”

He’s definitely not alone. A 2019 survey from the American Psychological Association found that 54% of Americans want to stay informed, but that reading the news causes them stress—and that was *before* the pandemic. Now, doomsurfing and its cousin, doomscrolling, have become common enough phenomena that they’ve even earned a nod from Merriam-Webster, which defines the terms as “the tendency to continue to surf or scroll through bad news, even though that news is saddening, disheartening, or depressing.”

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It’s good to stay on top of current events, of course—but only to a point. In the same way we watch what we eat, we also have to be aware of the information we’re consuming.

## **Understand your habits**

The internet produces 2.5 quintillion bytes of data every single day, and it can be tempting to try to see *all of it*. But in order to create an information diet that’s right for you, you first have to figure out your habits. Are you spending hours on end cycling through your newsfeed, or is it the viral posts on TikTok you can’t bring yourself to close?

You don’t have to wonder. There are many apps free you can use to track your unhealthy digital habits. Apple’s Screen Time feature lets you track the apps you spend the most time on, as well as set daily limits. If you’re an Android user, Digital Wellbeing works similarly, allowing you to scrutinize where

your time is going down to the minute. Besides those, apps like Social Fever, Moment or Offtime can help you keep track of your smartphone usage. If you want to monitor every aspect of your life, online and not, the passive journaling app Instant will use all the data your phone gathers to create comprehensive reports, which track everything from how much you sleep to how many steps you take.

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By knowing exactly how much of your life you've lost scrolling through Twitter, you'll have more than enough incentive to change.

## **Schedule consumption**

When it comes to food, most of us eat meals as opposed to snacking continually throughout the day. At least, that's the goal. The reality is that it doesn't always work out that way. How many times have you foregone the salad you planned to eat in favor of filling up on popcorn? Our relationship to apps operates in much the same way.

"The magnetic draw of snackable Twitter headlines coupled with the constant bleeping of the various news organizations I subscribe to is enough to keep me in a permanent state of news consumption, which serves no purpose other than to add huge and unnecessary levels of anxiety, Fredda Hurwitz, chief strategy and marketing officer at RedPeg, tells *Forbes*. "The statement 'she saw something shiny and got distracted' has taken on a whole new meaning recently."

Rather than reacting to every ding and buzz the moment they happen, train yourself to work with "untouchable hours." These are the hours where your phone can't get past the door of the room you're working in. When I first tried to schedule uninterrupted time into my day at JotForm, my initial goal was

two hours. I realized quickly just how hard it would be to break the habit of constantly looking at my phone.

But I stuck with it. Now, two hours doesn't seem long at all, and I've come to look forward to my needed tech breaks. Just as you don't give in to every urge you have to eat a donut (probably), you don't necessarily have to give in to every urge you have to check your phone, either.

If willpower alone doesn't do the trick, Anita Williams Woolley, an associate professor of organizational behavior and theory at Carnegie Mellon University's Tepper School of Business, suggests using app and website blockers like Freedom. Also, be sure to let your colleagues know about your schedule so you're not keeping them waiting to hear from you. To not miss important updates from social media or newsletters, use a free app like Mailbrew that sends them as an email digest at a time you decide.

## Streamline your inbox

On average, professionals spend 28% of their work day reading and answering email, an analysis from McKinsey shows. Some of that's necessary—email remains one of our main forms of communication, especially these days. But over-checking email is a time suck: Aside from the actual act of checking our emails, which we do, on average, every 37 minutes, there's also the time it takes to get back in the swing of things after an interruption. According to research, it can take more than 23 minutes to fully recover.

One great way of ensuring you're not weeding through reams of irrelevant emails is by limiting what you see in the first place. Writing for *Entrepreneur*, Digital Content Director Jessica Thomas suggests setting up filters for your company's shared or general email line.

"For example, I receive the messages sent to a shared email

address, but they were filling up my inbox,” she wrote. “So I created a filter for anything sent to that email address, and now it skips my inbox and goes directly to a folder in my email that I look at every few days.”

Another useful tip for those who regularly receive cold emails or pitches is to create a template response, in order to avoid having to send the same message over and over.

Email isn’t going away anytime soon, but luckily, a number of new products are poised to make managing your inbox easier. In June, the creators of Basecamp launched Hey; a few weeks ago, OnMail launched from the creators of Edison Mail.

Dvir Ben-Aroya, the cofounder and CEO of Spike, is even heralding “the Golden Age of email,” writing for Fast Company that, “With such investments in new email apps and services, it’s clear that email is becoming the darling of Silicon Valley again. There has been more innovation in email in the past two years than in the past 10.”

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