

Print vs. Online

The ways in which old-fashioned newspapers still trump online newspapers.

By *Jack Shafer* Posted Friday, Aug. 19, 2011, at 5:47 PM ET



The New York Times A little over five years ago, I [announced](#)

that I was canceling my subscription to the *New York Times*. My cancellation wasn't in protest of *Times* coverage of the Middle East, ethnic minorities, religion, sex, or any of the other thousand hot-button issues that cause readers to kill their subscriptions. I was getting rid of my newsprint *New York Times* because the dandy redesign of [NYTimes.com](#) had made it a superior vessel for conveying the news.

Another argument in favor of the online *Times* was that it was free and the print product was costing me \$621.40 a year. But mostly I found the new design more conducive to the way I live and work. I remain a big fan of [NYTimes.com](#) and especially of the [Times Reader](#), the Adobe AIR application for Mac, Windows, and Linux that allows you to read the paper offline after you've synched it to your computer. But less than a year after my *Times* cancellation, I was paying for home delivery of the newspaper again. I'd like to blame it on my wife, who was made miserable by my radical move and demanded reinstatement of our subscription. But I started missing the blue *Times* bag on my lawn and the glossy goodness of the Sunday magazine. Perhaps if I could have gotten my carrier to toss a blue-bagged computer preloaded with the *Times Reader* onto my lawn every morning, I could have survived.

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But no. What I really found myself missing was the news. Even though I spent ample time clicking through the *Times* website and the Reader, I quickly determined that I wasn't recalling as much of the newspaper as I should be. Going electronic had punished my powers of retention. I also noticed that I

was unintentionally ignoring a slew of worthy stories. Had **Slate's** "[News Quiz](#)" reappeared during this interval, I surely would have been a daily loser.

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In 2006, Jack Shafer [canceled](#) his Times subscription. In 2004, he [wrote](#) an "electronic editions" version of newspapers and added a [sequel](#) later in the year. In 2006, he [praised](#) the first version of the Times Reader.

My anecdotal findings about print's superiority were seconded earlier this month by an academic study presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. The paper, "[Medium Matters: Newsreaders' Recall and Engagement With Online and Print Newspapers](#)" (pdf), by Arthur D. Santana, Randall Livingstone, and Yoon Cho of the University of Oregon, pit a group of readers of the print edition of the *New York Times* against Web-*Times* readers. Each group was given 20 minutes reading time and asked to complete a short survey.

The researchers found that the print folks "remember significantly more news stories than online news readers"; that print readers "remembered significantly more topics than online newsreaders"; and that print readers remembered "more main points of news stories." When it came to recalling headlines, print and online readers finished in a draw.

Although the number of readers tested in the study is small—just 45—the paper confirms my print-superiority bias, at least when it comes to reading the *Times*. The paper explores several theories for why print rules. Online newspapers tend to give few cues about a story's importance, and the "agenda-setting function" of newspapers gets lost in the process. "Online readers are apt to acquire less information about national, international and political events than print newsreaders because of the lack of salience cues; they generally are not being told what to read via story placement and prominence—an enduring feature of the print product," the researchers write. The paper finds no evidence that the "dynamic online story forms" (you know, multimedia stuff) have made stories more memorable.

The paper cites other researchers on the subject who have theorized that the layout of online pages—which often insert ads mid-story or force readers to click additional pages to finish the story—may alter the reading experience. A print story, even one that jumps to another page, is not as difficult to chase to its conclusion. Newspapers are less distracting—as anybody who has endured an annoying online ad while reading a news story on the Web knows. Also, and I'm channeling the paper a little bit here, by virtue of habit and culture a newspaper commands a different sort of respect, engagement, and focus from readers.

Influenced as I am by Bill Hill's 1999 essay "[The Magic of Reading](#)" ([Microsoft Reader](#) required), I think that the conventional newspaper has a couple more advantages. The attention given to typeface,

letter-spacing, line-length, leading, page size, and margins, and all the other tricks in the newspaper typographer's bag, gives the eyes and the brain an edge over copy published for Web browsers.

After 15 years working in Web journalism, I still find it difficult to finish any newspaper story longer than 1,000 words on a computer screen. I either find a copy of the newspaper or, failing that, print it out. I'm no Luddite, though. You can't search for news in paper editions! You can get only a handful of out-of-town newspapers in paper editions on their day of publication, so I'm happy that both reading environments exist. My iPad reading experience has been mixed. While it's a joy to carry 25 editions of *The New Yorker* and whole libraries of books on an iPad, for real reading satisfaction I still reach for the print editions.

As consumers of news continue to shift from newspapers to computers, reader engagement with the news will change, conclude the authors. Everybody who writes, edits, and produces news copy needs to give this paper a gander. As it's a 30-page pdf, I don't mind if you print it.

I have a 6-inch stack of printouts in my office that I keep around so young visitors have something to draw on when they come by. What constructive thing do you do with your discarded printouts? Send word to. I wonder if there is a market for a hard-copy version of my [Twitter](#) feed. (Email may be quoted by name in "The Fray," **Slate**'s readers' forum; in a future article; or elsewhere unless the writer stipulates otherwise. Permanent disclosure: **Slate** is owned by the Washington Post Co.) Track my errors: This [hand-built RSS feed](#) will ring every time **Slate** runs a "Press Box" correction. For email notification of errors in this specific column, type *typographer* in the subject head of an email message, and send it to.

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