Personalized, short, and sweet. No, this isn’t about Danny DeVito. As many millennial and the general populace seem to have more day-to-day commitments and less free time, the way in which news is consumed has had to change in order to keep up. Most people are aware of the “print is dead” phenomenon and the increasing takeover of online-based platforms. The New York Times has the most readers in the history of its existence, largely due to its base of over more than 1 million online subscribers. But I’m talking about the next step—taking these already condensed versions of print media and truncating them even further. Companies have certainly accommodated to the average user’s exponentially shorter attentions span, which I think is great in some facets. In other ways, it seems to be somewhat disheartening.

One of the biggest adaptations that a lot of news companies have made is offering no frills, straight to the point news stories for their users. Outlets like “the Skimm” are well established in this sector of consolidated new stories. But other groups have rolled out their own solutions as well, such as New York Times Now. It’s all about curating news for the user’s interests and their limited time with daily news compilations. A morning cup of coffee for most is now accompanied by reading the news that was just sent to their iPhone.

I personally use New York Times Now, so I obviously consider it a useful, smart, and well-designed app. But I also find the prospect scary at sometimes. While it is wonderful to have my stories sent to me each day, I have always felt that part of the intrigue of news is sorting through each section of writing to find what actually matters. I’ve found some of my favorite news stories by accident when just perusing the paper. One might discover something they never knew about while glancing through the Business section of their local paper, which they do not usually even look at. Limiting one’s intake of news articles is great in one way, but also dangerous in another. We get used to things and never search beyond what we already consider newsworthy. The New York Times, on the flip side of Now, has also released “Insider,” which gives more access to behind the scenes interviews and extra articles. I think this is an excellent offer, as most people in the industry are moving only towards the shortened news format. The New York Times is offering content related to both sides of this argument and, with “Insider” encouraging a more involved experience. Again, while I think that these condensed news apps are useful in some ways, incorporating a full, traditional news experience into one’s reading repertoire should be equally important.

But it’s not just newspapers that have moved into this area. Native advertising has become a huge way for companies, especially on social media sites, to incorporate their messages in a shortened way to catch their viewer’s eye. For example, when scrolling down Twitter and sorting through endless tweets of friends replying and complaining about school, an advertiser may place a form of their advertising in as well. It looks like a Tweet and one can interact with it as usual, by liking, retweeting, or sharing it. It’s “native” in that it resembles the platform users interact with.

Native advertising on sites like Facebook and Twitter is a way in which agencies have understood the necessity of moving towards catching the user’s limited attention span. Ads on the side of the webpage are simply too much work to read anymore; they must take the form of the actual content in order to be interacted with. And while advertising is certainly less important than reading a breadth of journalism, I still find this idea somewhat saddening. It places the reader again in a passive place where they no longer have to do any of the work. At least with newspapers, one can generally have some control over what they receive in their media. But advertising is completely out of anyone’s control. We are fed these visuals automatically, which is somewhat foreboding in terms of the power advertising agencies are beginning to control.

I think that the answer to this phenomenon of person-centric, faster and faster media, like many other things, is remembering that it is a tool to enhance one’s experience. Being quickly supplied with pieces that cater to our interests is certainly beneficial in remaining informed and aware of major news events. But remember to read the full paper every once in a while, or even expose oneself to a variety of commercials on TV and the internet. Breadth is something that these new mediums still seems to fall short on.

Hi Henry,

Great draft. I think that my main comment is to tighten it up a bit here and there (see comments in the body of the article). I would also highlight the idea you bring up that with this shortening and tailoring to interests comes loss of diversity in material that each person is reading and the implications of this/why it’s important to stumble across unknown things in the Business section. I think that you touch upon this in places but this could be drawn out a bit!

-Will