

News filter: Navigating the new media

by [Mark Silk](#)

This article appears in the [September 22, 2009](#) issue.

The number of news sources has expanded tremendously in recent years, but much of this expansion has been in opinion journalism and news analysis, not original reporting. While traditional news sources are struggling to survive, new media sources—many of them openly partisan—proliferate.

We asked some expert observers of the religion scene how they are navigating the new media. What do they read, watch and listen to? How have their own reading, listening or viewing habits changed over the past decade?

I've always been a news junkie, and from time to time a news professional. It runs in the family. My late father and brother were journalists, and my earliest memories include having the *New York Times* and the *Herald Tribune* at the breakfast table with the honeyed voice of Dallas Townsend delivering the world on CBS radio. Though I started my career intending to become a medieval historian, I drifted into freelance writing about contemporary America and then into daily journalism, spending a decade as a reporter, editorial writer and columnist at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

Since 1996, I've taught and run a research center at a small liberal arts college, focusing a good deal of my attention on how the news media deal with religious subject matter. For the past two years, I've blogged about religion and politics (www.spiritual-politics.org), and as a result have become a species of journalist again. I'm not kidding: I was offered press credentials to the Inauguration, am included in faith-based conference calls with officials of the Obama administration, and get calls and e-mails returned by the White House. I even do some reporting. I have met the new news environment, and it is me.

So a measure of professional engagement controls my current news consumption. I still take two dead-tree newspapers—the *New York Times* and the *Hartford Courant*.

But the Tribune Company-owned *Courant* has gotten so slight that I am on the point of giving up the subscription. I look at the *Washington Post* every morning, and I listen to NPR's *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered* in the car while driving back and forth to and from work.

At work, I'm pretty much in thrall to the continuous news cycle. I'll check the AP wire on Yahoo as soon as I sit down at my desk, and then scan the general-interest blogs and blogzines—the [Daily Dish](#), [Politico](#), [Talking Points Memo](#), [Huffington Post](#), the [Daily Beast](#). Depending on where the news is coming from, I may make the [Anchorage Daily News](#) or the Columbia [State](#) part of my regular routine, for a few days anyway. But my news habit is skewed toward religion, and religion and politics in particular.

That means keeping up with a slew of blogs, especially the ones that do their own reporting—or at least some aggregating of reports. Many of these are maintained by legitimate reporters—[Michael Paulson](#) at the *Boston Globe*, [Michelle Boorstein and Jacqueline Salmon](#) at the *Washington Post*, [Dan Gilgoff](#) at *U.S. News & World Report*, [Cathy Grossman](#) at *USA Today*, to name a few. For professorial thumb sucking, there's the [Religion Dispatches](#) 'zine and [Immanent Frame](#).

As a former full-time opinion writer, I don't share the reporter's congenital contempt for the form. A good eight-inch editorial can often tell you as much as you need to know about an issue, organizing the relevant facts, putting them in context, and not excluding another point of view. Good opinion blogs, which are really extended editorial columns, always have something to teach, whether they make their living jumping up and down (like [Street Prophets](#)) or take a more measured approach (David Gibson's [Pontifications](#)).

What online news and opinion do that hard-copy opinion can't is put the source material at the reader's fingertips. It's journalism with footnotes, and, God help my academic soul, as a consumer and producer I love it.

—**Mark Silk**, who directs the Leonard E. Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life and is professor of religion in public life at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut.

The *New York Times* is at the back door by 6 a.m., and the smell of newsprint reinforces the smell of coffee. More early morning reading comes from the Internet. Juan Cole at [Informed Comment](#) is up first with his analysis, historical and current, of

Iraq and the Middle East, easily beating out the *Times* and the *Washington Post*. Then Patrick Lang (at [Sic Semper Tyrannis](#)), retired military intelligence officer, brings his skeptical eye to the Middle East and Washington policy making. Cole and Lang are knowledgeable outliers about foreign policy and the conspiracy theories it spawns; reading them is always a fact-based experience.

During the day [Talking Points Memo](#) comes round for a perusal: good on the Bush-Cheney overreach, its Washington coverage remains informed, though it takes too many scandals too seriously. [TPM Café](#) is the best feature; Todd Gitlin and M. J. Rosenberg always deserve a read. [DotCommonweal](#), where I blog from time to time, covers a lot of territory, from religion to TV to Catholic realities and gossip; I check it out daily.

As the world turns and events shape up, some blogs come into focus while others recede. Those that analyzed the latest polls during the 2008 election have fallen off my favorites list (though Nate Silver of [FiveThirtyEight: Politics Done Right](#) had some good analysis of the Iranian election results). Most of these will come back as the 2010 congressional elections take off.

Though I rarely click to his blog, the [Daily Dish](#), Andrew Sullivan did a first-rate job following postelection Iran; so did [The Lede](#) blog at the *New York Times*. During the war chaos in Iraq, the [Washington Post](#) online was always worth a look; there I followed Walter Pincus, Dana Priest and E. J. Dionne. Their colleague, military reporter Thomas Ricks, penetrated my consciousness only when his book *Fiasco* appeared. Recent cutbacks at the *Post* and a shift in editorial direction have dimmed its star in my telescope.

E-mail notices and mailing lists are the perfect format for following highly specific issues. “Catholic Democrats” and “Catholics in Alliance” sent out on-the-spot information about the 2008 election. New York University’s Center on Law and Security closely follows U.S. detainee and torture policies. I read the Council on Foreign Relations daily update of world news, which includes Bernard Gwertzman’s interviews with foreign policy mavens.

By the end of the news day, PBS’s *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* usually has an extended analysis of one of the events that had only a quick read during the day. Friends who are avid fans of NPR encourage a listen, but without a car or downtime, I don’t use the radio as a news source. I don’t Twitter.

This paradise for news junkies notwithstanding, the obsessive need to check back on breaking stories is—well, a little loony. Would Karl Barth hold his Bible in one hand and his computer in the other? Hard to imagine.

—**Margaret O'Brien Steinfels**, *codirector of the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture. She was editor of Commonweal from 1988 to 2003.*

I'm pretty old-school when it comes to new media. I worry a fair amount about the demise of the ink-on-pulp newspaper, about how you sustain a democracy without an informed citizenry, and about how the next Nixon will get his comeuppance without reporters like Woodward and Bernstein and a paper like the *Washington Post* to do it. So I take my news with my coffee in the morning, slathering my toast with butter and my fingers with newsprint.

I used to subscribe to the *Boston Globe* and the *Times*—which here on Cape Cod refers to the *Cape Cod Times*, a darned good local newspaper. But I axed the *Globe* when it axed some of its best journalists, and a couple years ago I substituted that other *Times* for the Cape Cod variety. Because I want to know how the other half lives and thinks, I also take the *Wall Street Journal*, which hasn't yet been destroyed by Rupert Murdoch, though I do miss the wonderfully literary narrative pieces it used to run far more often. I also subscribe to *Time* and *Newsweek*, because thanks to *Time's* David Van Biema and *Newsweek's* Lisa Miller they both cover religion really well.

My college roommate, Paul Bass, was one of the first journalists to start a one-person online newspaper, but I haven't read his *New Haven Independent* in years. I am a fan and frequent reader of killingthebuddha.com, which describes itself as "a religion magazine for people made anxious by churches." That site's real claim to fame, however, is its refusal to allow any of its pieces to traffic in the sort of cant endemic to both the secular left and the religious right.

I used to watch *Hardball with Chris Matthews*, but I can't stand shows like that any more. Listening to smart people saying dumb things they know are false depresses me. Like most of my college students, I tune in regularly to Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, and not just because Stewart was kind enough to interview me about my last book (and Colbert funny enough to goof on it). Both Stewart and Colbert are pigeonholed as comedians, but each is really a social critic—an H. L. Mencken for the hyperinformation age.

This doesn't have much to do with news, but I watch *30 Rock* religiously (albeit online). Tina Fey is beautiful and smart and funny, of course. But that show also has its finger on the pulse. It's the only television series I know that really takes on America's original sin of race.

Oddly, I started my own writing career in the virtual world and now write mostly for the sort of newspapers an actual human being tosses toward your front stoop. My first freelance piece as a grown-up, "Timothy Leary Is Dead and Well and Blasting Through Outer Space," ran at Salon.com, but most of my op-eds now run in *USA Today*.

I did recently join [Twitter](https://twitter.com/sprothero)—you can find me there as @sprothero—because for some crazy reason I decided I wanted to do a minicourse that boiled the world's great religions down to 140-characters "tweets" (Xianity140: Adam&Eve hungry so we=sinners. JC died&rose so we=saved. Is God3in1/Bible true/Kingdom coming/Pope Catholic? Believe/ Love! Ahh!). But I soon found myself following events swirling around the Iranian election through that site.

When it comes to where I get my news, I suppose I'm a lot like other overeducated middle-age Americans. It's a little bit here and a little bit there, and a lot of trying to keep up with the next news thing. It's odd how in this age of the new media even a few years ago can feel like a universe away.

—**Stephen Prothero**, *professor of religious studies at Boston University and the author of Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't.*

One of the things on my summer to-do list is to donate the family television to charity. We intentionally missed the switch to digital television, and that was the final step in our slow but steady transition to being a television-free household.

If you had told me in 1999 that I would be giving away my TV in 2009, I probably would not have believed you. Even though I never watched many television programs, I did tune in for major political events and some national news. Now, however, almost any event of national or international significance is broadcast on the Web. That's where I watch it.

While my daily news consumption a decade ago usually did not include watching television, it did include skimming two national newspapers and other printed news publications. I still remember the feeling of depression that would set in after I

completed this ritual each morning. That's all? There's no more news to read until tomorrow?

It's much better to be a news junky today. A fix is always a click away. This has allowed me to do something I couldn't have imagined ten years ago: construct a daily newsfeed tailored to my particular interests.

In addition to following breaking news, I track stories involving religion and law and news about religion's role in public life. I do this by skimming the headlines in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* and using a specific Lexis-Nexis search to identify religion-related stories of interest in other major papers. I also frequently scan titles from a host of blogs, including Howard Friedman's [Religion Clause](#); Howard Bashman's [How Appealing](#); Tom Goldstein's [SCOTUSblog](#); the [Volokh Conspiracy](#); Andrew Sullivan's [Daily Dish](#); the Baptist Joint Committee's [Blog from the Capital](#); Mark Silk's [Spiritual Politics](#); *Commonweal's* [dotCommonweal](#); the Catholic legal theory blog, [Mirror of Justice](#); the [Christianity Today Politics Blog](#); and, of course, the Christian Century's [Theolog](#). Additionally, when a story I'm following is breaking, I usually create a Google alert to track its development. I also download a variety of audio podcasts, including Sunday news talk shows, NPR programs, events from Georgetown University Law Center's Supreme Court Institute and discussions sponsored by the National Constitution Center. I listen to these podcasts during my daily run.

In many ways, this new media age is a dream come true for those of us with news addictions. The downside is that managing those addictions is especially difficult. I've learned to do much more skimming than reading. I used to write a personal blog on religion and public affairs, but I've had to give it up for the time being due to competing responsibilities (I hope to get back in the game in a somewhat different form). I've learned that I need to observe an Internet-free Sabbath.

In sum, I recognize the need to resist the temptations of this new media age. But I would never go back to the old days.

—**Melissa Rogers**, *director of the Center for Religion and Public Affairs at Wake Forest University School of Divinity.*

A friend and I were discussing the future of journalism as we watched a stunning rainbow fade to dusk. We agreed that newspapers, at least, are on their way out. Rainbows? I know: a terrible, pathetic fallacy, a cheap cliché. But cheap clichés were

what I loved best about the old print media: the revealing vulgarity of “Headless Body in Topless Bar” (*New York Post*, 1982), the blunt honesty of “Ford to City: Drop Dead” (*New York Daily News*, 1975). Though neither the *Post* nor the *News* seems to be in imminent danger, it’s true that I don’t read them as often as I once did. Tabloids, it turns out, don’t translate well online. The *New York Times* does—I read it there more faithfully, if more critically, than I ever did when I’d pick up a print copy on my way down to the subway. Too bad it’s dying.

The friend with whom I was discussing “the future of journalism”—the phrase requires scare quotes because it’s so vague as to be absurd—happens to be a thoughtful nonprofiteer tasked with tending that amorphous future and its various apostles, mostly techy types and ardent exponents of “citizen journalism.” That’s another bothersome phrase. It implies that as someone who makes my living as a journalist I’m somehow less than or simply other than a citizen. I write for *Rolling Stone* and *Harper’s*; I am a citizen; I am a journalist; and I even have a blog. I like blogs. But I don’t see them as a replacement for anything, really; they’re a new forum for and sometimes a new genre of nonfiction writing. Sadly, neither forum nor genre intersects often with my favorite variety of nonfiction, the mutant form known variously as literary journalism, narrative nonfiction or, most disturbingly, creative nonfiction. “Citizen journalists,” meanwhile—at least those self-identified as such—seem little interested in the nuances of my favorite subject, religion.

So on one level the revolutionary changes in media haven’t much changed my reading habits. I still prefer print periodicals such as *Harper’s*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Oxford American*, *Mother Jones*, *National Geographic*, *New York Review of Books*, and even magazines like *GQ* and *Esquire*, which every now and then will run an astonishingly brilliant nonfiction novella buried behind all the dreck about starlets and abs and things you must buy. The most informative news, I believe, is that which is delivered in reported essays. Those have always been partisan, so I’m not much alarmed by lamentations for the passing of the ostensibly objective press. That kind of journalism—a narrative of 20th-century liberal-left centrism—was a product of the cold war. I don’t miss that, either.

Ironically, some of the online sources I find most useful are deeply ideological sites dedicated to the defense of the old neutrality myth. For instance, I read [GetReligion](#) because its bloggers do a good job of monitoring the main religion stories in the traditional news media. They’re conservatives, though they don’t seem to know it. That’s fine, because I do. Likewise, one of my favorite new sites, [Demotix](#), declares

itself free of political agendas, dedicated simply to free speech for all—as if that’s not a political agenda. That’s fine, too, and not just because I happen to share that agenda.

[ReligionDispatches](#), meanwhile, wears its liberal-left heart on its sleeve, but that in no way detracts from my appreciation of the role it plays as a source of counterintelligence to the blindly centrist narrative of traditional media. For that sort of thing I check in on [Counterpunch](#) as well, which often features reporting by writers such as JoAnn Wypijewski and Patrick Cockburn that I probably wouldn’t be able to find in a world without interweb tubes. (Neither writer, to my knowledge, thinks of himself or herself as a religion reporter, but both do a better job of recognizing the role of religion in the world than most self-declared religion writers.) Those tubes also bring me more radio reporting from around the world than I ever listened to before. I watch less these days, and hear more.

What about long-form, reported narrative nonfiction? The Internet hasn’t been kind. I suggest my friend Bill Wasik’s new book, *And Then There’s This: How Stories Live and Die in Viral Culture*, for insight into how and why viral media displace the slow-growth journalism that takes months to report and oftentimes just as long to write, the journalism that brings us news from within worlds rather than reports from the surface.

—**Jeff Sharlet**, who writes about religion for Rolling Stone. He is the author of *The Family and coeditor of Believer, Beware: First-Person Dispatches from the Margins of Faith, an anthology of writings from [killingthebuddha.com](#).*

Some fathers got ties or socks for Father’s Day. This year I got a device they say could change my life, or at least the way I access information that affects it. The package I opened contained the latest iteration of the Kindle, the wireless reading device that allows you to directly download books. It purports, also, to read to you and assist your perusal of newspapers, magazines and blogs.

Honestly, I wouldn’t know if it actually does all it claims to do. I plan to give it a trial spin while on vacation. I’m not certain I’ll like it.

I count myself among a vanishing breed of media consumers who prefer the newspaper. Admittedly, these days my daily subscription to the *Washington Post*

feels more like a vote of confidence in a medium that I appreciate for the originality of its reporting and the way it feels in my hands. Through the years I have developed a certain trust in the invisible team of editors that works late into the evening to decide the relative importance and placement of the stories I read on the front page. The experience of reading a screen full of headlines stacked on each other, usually in the same font size, is not something I enjoy. Indeed, there is something lost in the translation from the printed page to the LCD screen.

But one hardly can survive these days without journeying into the world of online news and its news value-blurring counterpart, the blog. An element of online news I appreciate is the simplicity of having current news stories on preset topics sent to me every morning. I find the research function of online news to be its major contribution to my media consumption.

As for blogs, I contribute content to them much more than I read them. My organization, the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, has [Blog from the Capital](#). And I enjoy the dialogue created in online forums like the *Washington Post/Newsweek* magazine site [On Faith](#), for which I am a regular contributor. In a medium that thrives on a reinforce-my-world-view-or-else philosophy, sites like On Faith encourage conversation among people who hold a dizzying array of views. For every site like this one, however, there are many more that prefer uncivil argument to genuine conversation.

As I was reminded during a recent trip to the Newseum—one of my new favorite D.C. sites—news is pervasive. While I choose to remain a network news viewer, I also sometimes watch *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. I listen to satellite radio in the car, and while my speakers sometimes blare Wilco and Neil Young, on any given day I'm likely listening to CNN or NPR as I maneuver home down Constitution Avenue. We'll see what happens on my experiment with my new wireless reading device. It seems to me that transforming my media habits is a lot to ask of a machine that's less than one-third of an inch thick.

—**J. Brent Walker**, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty in Washington, D.C.

To navigate is to “steer a course through a medium.” My course gets launched daily at 4:44 a.m when four newspapers reach our door. We check out the two Chicago dailies, read the *New York Times*, admire the *Wall Street Journal's* news coverage

and dis-admire its editorials (though its attention to religion is quite good).

Martys will share breakfast over newspapers as long as they and we last. Since I need many items which appear in them, I clip so much that by the time my spouse gets to them they look like confetti.

At noon the mail comes, flooding our condo with magazines, scores of which we receive each cycle. Secularly, the *Economist* and the *Times Literary Supplement* are indispensables. The religion bin includes the *Christian Century*, *Christianity Today*, *America*, *Commonweal* and *U.S. Catholic*. *Commentary* gives us enough skewed, neoconservative material to inspire grumbling. Simply put, I am a magazine junkie, who finds an excuse to pursue my avocation in ways that overlap or dovetail with my vocation as writer and speaker. If not visiting with someone or looking out the window, I'll almost never be caught not reading: I read in airports, in the back seats of autos, in waiting rooms.

As for new media, I will sing the praises of what is accessible online. For example, chartered to write on "Charity in Truth," the new papal encyclical, I found by the eighth day of its appearance 10,000,000 online entries about it. Some were junky drivel; others were blasphemous and obscene. Yet easily retrievable and usable were the long document itself and thoughtful comments—many of them scanned from print media. I am two hours by bus or \$25 by cab from our university library. I cannot picture life in my emeritus situation without the Internet at hand.

Not a fan of most cable news comment, I find TV of little help. Navigating the figurative waters of Facebook and YouTube and all the rest is beyond me. They are too vast, deep and stormy, so I do not sign on. The search engines such as Google and Yahoo help me find access to almost anything worthwhile, and they get used many times a day.

—**Martin E. Marty**, *who recently wrote The Mystery of the Child*.