

Incoming

By [David Heim](#)

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A writer in the *Century* some years ago recalled in passing the era when mail was delivered twice a day. He noted, somewhat whimsically, how that practice ensured at least two hopeful moments in the day. For who knew what might arrive in the next post—it could be a letter from a longlost friend, the offer of a dream job, the awarding of a prize, an invitation to a party, a mea culpa from the girlfriend who jilted you in college. Receiving such a letter was highly unlikely, of course, but not strictly impossible—and that kept hope alive.

The advent of e-mail, along with the stream of texting and social networking, has made such hope perhaps too readily available, turning hopefulness into something more like a nervous twitch. The *New York Times* [reported recently](#) that the incessant use of cellphones and computers may be rewiring our brains, and part of the rewiring makes us insatiably, unreasonably hungry for the next bit of new information. The need to check incoming messages comes to override any other priority. Instead of doing the hard work of sorting out the information one already has and figuring out what is important, one is constantly searching for the next new bit of information. This is not healthy.

Laments about how gadgets are taking over our lives are not new, but the *Times* story, along with Nicholas Carr's new book [The Shallows](#), is among the first to bring brain research into the conversation.

As the *Times* story notes, the prospect of rewiring the brain is not all bad. It is good that the brain is flexible enough to be rewired. If life now requires us to multitask, the brain rewires itself to help us get

better at it.

But the reflexive search for the new remains a problem. It is like the plight of the student who has a compulsion to read one more book, one more journal article, before getting started on writing his paper. In the end the compulsion is a form of avoidance.

Taking note of the *Times* piece, the *Harvard Business Review* [offers](#) a few tips for managing networking compulsions—including one on “finding hope outside your inbox.”