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## Fruit, chocolate and the Sydney Morning Herald

*Economists at the London School of Economics got some students into the lab. They got them to fill in a survey (the survey was basically a decoy). Then they said to the students 'Thank you for filling in the survey, as a token of our appreciation, would you like a snack? What would you like: fruit, or chocolate?' The students, being members of the human race, mostly chose chocolate.*

*In another variant of the experiment, the economists got the students to fill in the survey and said 'thank you very much, **next week**, we'll bring you a snack. What would you like **next week**, fruit or chocolate?' And the students said 'fruit sounds nice, thank you very much'. The next week they would turn up with the fruit and say 'here's the fruit you asked for ... are you sure you wouldn't like chocolate?' At which point many students would switch: 'Last week, when I said I would want an apple, I must have been insane!'*

That's a slightly edited excerpt from a recent speech by [Tim Harford](#), author of *The Undercover Economist* and, most recently, *The Logic of Life*. He followed that example up with another experiment by the same economists. This time they offered the students a choice of films. When deciding what they wanted to watch that night the students chose *American Pie*, *Mrs Doubtfire*, *Sleepless in Seattle* and the like. When asked what films they would like to watch in two weeks' time, the students chose Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, *Three Colours: Blue*, *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Schindler's List*.

My knowledge of movies is atrocious and I have to confess I had never heard of *Rashomon*, but you get the idea: the choices we make in the here and now aren't necessarily the same as the choices we make over a longer time frame. Whether it's an exercise regime, a diet program or trying to quit smoking, we've all been torn between satisfying our immediate desires and doing what is best for us. But what's that got to do with the *Sydney Morning Herald*?

Well, many people out there fight the desire for immediate satisfaction and find a balance between the present and future. People do exercise, they do eat fruit and, in an effort to better themselves intellectually, they choose to read Fairfax's *Sydney Morning Herald* over Murdoch's *Daily Telegraph*. SMH's high-brow reputation, 177 years in the making, is a valuable one; the fan base is loyal and there are plenty of advertising dollars looking for high-brow consumers. Unfortunately, it is a reputation being rapidly destroyed.

The internet gives the paper's editors the ability to see, instantaneously, what we read. It will come as no surprise to Tim Harford that the most popular stories are about sex, nudity and, in today's perfect example, [incest](#) – even amongst SMH's supposedly sophisticated readers. Put chocolate in front of us, we eat it.

The powers that be see what's popular and, presumably abiding by the motto 'the customer is always right', feed us more. The net result is that Bob Irwin (Steve's father), Nicole Kidman and a hedgehog all make it onto today's [SMH homepage](#). Robert Mugabe does not.

That is sad. It is also faulty logic. Sure, we're all guilty of clicking on the populist articles but our

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actions belie the reason we're there. If I want to read trash, there are better places to get it. I type smh.com.au into my browser because I'm looking for serious commentary and, if I don't get it, I'll go elsewhere. With many of the world's great papers now free online, there is no shortage of competition for my time.

Fairfax's business is under assault from all sides. Its most profitable source of revenue – classified ads – has been diverted to the likes of Seek and realestate.com.au. Succumbing to populism and destroying its wonderful brand names will only accelerate the decline.