

Brother, Can You Spare a Roll?

by [Jeff Plude](#) (June 2020)



Trans Layers 1 (wall installation), Sakir Gökçebag, 2010

I can understand why a person would think of saving his own backside in a figurative sense during a pandemic. But I can't understand why he would think of his own backside in a literal sense, as in sitting on the toilet, during such a time. Like many Americans, my wife and I went to the grocery store a month after the world was put on lockdown (or house arrest,

depending on your perspective) and found the shelves that used to be filled with toilet paper—three of them, each one about thirty feet long—conspicuously empty. It was enough to give a shopper spontaneous constipation.

My sister-in-law decided to try to get to the bottom of it all.

She was shopping in a supermarket near her home in Florida and saw a woman piling her cart with large multi-roll packs of toilet paper. So she asked her fellow shopper why she was so bent on buying so much toilet paper.

Because of the coronavirus, of course! “What’s your take on all this?” the woman blithely shot back, sounding like she’d been watching way too many babbling heads on TV.

“But the coronavirus is a respiratory illness and has nothing to do with the digestive tract,” my sister-in-law patiently informed her.

Diarrhea is not one of the symptoms of the coronavirus. But this woman’s brain was not in control, apparently; her sphincter was. And she is far from alone, as the purged shelves attested. But actually, the toilet paper effect, or better yet the toilet paper syndrome, as I have come to think of it, is a perfectly predictable behavior pattern that is widely observable in *homo consumptor* in his modern habitat.

In classic marketing parlance, or social psychology or economic behavior theory, if you prefer, the current toilet paper mania is accounted for by two basic principles: scarcity and social proof. Both are self-fulfilling prophecies.

Scarcity, except for a few interesting variations, seems self-evident—the less something is available, the more humans desire it. Which is why we hear the old hard-sell call-to-action in countless forms, its most basic being “Buy now while supplies last!” Panic buying is just an extreme form of this. Social proof is the phenomenon where people who don’t know what to do simply do what other people are doing, especially if those people are similar to them. In its more innocuous form social proof can be a useful and even necessary shortcut in navigating the labyrinth that modern life has become; there’s so much you need to know to navigate your way through even one ordinary day, and the wrong turns are many. But this cognitive tool and tendency that is built into humans is often exploited by “compliance practitioners,” as social psychologist Robert Cialdini calls them in his seminal book *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* (the rest of us call them salesmen, politicians, and con-men, to name a few). Herd mentality is another way of thinking of it. Mr. Cialdini describes how Native Americans on the Great Plains hunted buffalo by decoying the leaders to run off a cliff, pushed by the force of the rest of the herd, their eyes set wide apart so that it was hard to see directly in front of them and their heads held down as they stampeded through the mass of fur and cloud of dust, all blindly following and plummeting to their death. Buffalo see, buffalo do.

Indeed, marketers know that emotion plays a lead role in the tragicomedy of the modern buying process. In fact, Mr. Cialdini recommends asking yourself rational questions to

uncover the reality of the compliance situation. In other words, to break the unconscious, instinctual spell—as my brave and astute sister-in-law tried to do with her sister-consumer.

For those who aren't a professional psychologist or marketer, perhaps you'd simply call it selfishness—every man for himself, the rest be damned. Mr. Cialdini disagrees. I'm not so sure.

While all of this may account for the general motivation of the toilet paper hoarders, it does not in the least explain their specific fixation. Why toilet paper should be the object of such ardent desire at the first signs of a pandemic that affects the respiratory system and not the digestive is curious indeed. Maybe the sudden confrontation of mortality *en masse*, inflamed by mass media, triggers in twenty-first-century man a fear of reverting to a primitive existence, one without such niceties as toilet paper.

And toilet paper is a nicety, at least historically speaking. In fact there's perhaps no greater or more humble example of what separates the delicacy of the modern world from the rawness of the old world.

Toilet paper is supposed to have been first developed and used in the sixth century A.D. in China. But it didn't make its way west until more than a millennium later. It wasn't until the mid-nineteenth century that the great unwashed stopped using whatever was at hand—sometimes their own hand—to wipe their backsides. The ancient Romans used something called a *tersorium*—a stick with a sea sponge on the end of it, which

they washed off in a bucket of salt water or vinegar so it could be reused (to the horror of our rarefied sensibilities). During the Renaissance, Rabelais's over-the-top Gargantua disdained toilet paper, preferring above all the downy neck of a goose. (To which I say: toilet paper has the distinct advantages that it not only doesn't honk, but especially that it doesn't bite.) This prejudice against toilet paper can still be seen in Rabelais's countrymen in the form of the bidet, which is synonymous with their penchant, at least in France's major cities, for overrefinement.

If you think such a topic is too unseemly for a civilized person of the Digital Age, I can't quite agree. Even God himself did not deem the general topic unworthy of his notice and regulation. In Deuteronomy 23 he gives the wandering Israelites explicit instructions on how they should conduct themselves regarding this lowly of bodily functions, and why:

Thou shalt have a place also without the camp, whither thou shalt go forth abroad:

And thou shalt have a paddle upon thy weapon; and it shall be, when thou wilt ease thyself abroad, thou shalt dig therewith, and shalt turn back and cover that which cometh from thee:

For the Lord thy God walketh in the midst of thy camp, to deliver thee, and to give up thine enemies before thee; therefore shall thy camp be holy: that he see no unclean thing in thee, and turn away from thee.

As for myself, I grew up in the foothills of the Adirondacks, which means that on at least one occasion I have found myself squatting in the woods over a small hole that I'd dug with a trowel. But even then, in that most earthy and vulnerable of human postures, I had a trusty roll of toilet paper by my side (yes, I put the used paper in a ziplock bag to be discarded later). Back home after the camping trip, I overflowed with a new appreciation for the homely, glorious flush toilet, without which toilet paper would probably not exist in its present dissolvable form.

Indeed, toilet paper followed the development of the modern toilet and the indoor plumbing needed to accommodate it. While the British led the way on the toilet, it was two Americans who invented what we now know (and covet) as commercial toilet paper. In 1857 Joseph Gayety started selling his new product; he packaged it in flat sheets and marketed it as "medicinal," though unfortunately it wasn't "splinter free" (toilet paper wouldn't be until well into the next century). But it wasn't until 1883 that Seth Wheeler of Albany, New York—a historical nugget I was mildly amused to discover, since I have lived there on and off for a good part of my life—took it to the next and definitive level: he patented perforated toilet paper wound around a tube. And if that weren't enough, he designed a holder for his new roll, the now ubiquitous bracket mounted on the wall next to every residential toilet in the developed world.

After that, the improvements to toilet paper were much less revolutionary: increasing the thickness and softness, adding texture and patterns (which come in various colors, but now with only a white background in the U.S., Americans apparently believing that different shades of toilet paper was taking a good thing too far). Some is even scented, which I think is,

as the saying goes, like putting lipstick on a pig.

Until a couple of months ago, I didn't think twice or even once about so plentiful, mundane an item. Then it was suddenly and inexplicably gone. As G.K. Chesterton said: "The way to love anything is to realise that it might be lost." This epigram came near the end of his meditation on temporarily losing the use of one of his legs because of a sprained foot. I might never quite love toilet paper the way I might long my foot if I were to lose the use of it. But then again, my wife and I still have a few rolls on the holders in our two-and-half bathrooms and on our closet shelf where we keep the extras.

After seeing the empty shelves in the grocery store, I found myself asking my wife how long it would be before we ran out of our current supply. She said a couple of months. I started quizzing her, asking her how many rolls of toilet paper she thought we went through in a week. She said she didn't know, but she should've known better. I asked again. She finally gave in and said she guessed we went through about a roll a week, which would be a roll every two weeks for each of us; that is we were way below the [national average](#) in 2018—the highest in the world—of using 141 rolls a year per person. Which was somewhat of a relief.

But still. What were we going to do when it was out? I asked her.

She said we could try Walmart, which we don't usually shop at. I asked her why she thought those shelves would be any less

bare than at the store we usually buy toilet paper from. That's where we left it, since she was getting a little weary of the conversation, if you can call it that. Maybe the federal government could've thrown in a free value pack of toilet paper with each stimulus check. Though there would have likely been a feverish dispute on Capitol Hill, no doubt, about one-ply or two-, not to mention textures and patterns.

But the current toilet paper "crisis," if I can use so bold a word, is not so funny on second thought.

For instance, in December 1973, during the American embargo of Arab oil that created long lines at the gas pumps, there was a run on toilet paper for several months. This one was caused by a Wisconsin congressman who represented a district in which the paper industry was a major employer. He told a newspaper there could be a shortage of toilet paper, which Johnny Carson then duly mocked in his monologue on *The Tonight Show* and the stampede was on. (Somebody has even made a short film about the whole thing, released this year in fact and called "[The Great Toilet Paper Scare](#).") Who knew the nation's toilet paper supply was so vulnerable a target? My parents' generation had been warned during wartime that "Loose lips might sink ships." But even toilet paper turned out to be at considerable risk from a few reckless words!

But if no toilet paper in the house is not quite a matter of life and death, neither is it something I care to think about too much. Deep down, a part of me is refusing to believe that the grocery store shelves of the United States of America, which gave the world the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, which vanquished Hitler and the Nazis, and which won the Cold War, could be without toilet paper. But at the

same time I can't deny what I see while shopping.

Some stores started rationing purchases of toilet paper, but it seems to not much avail, at least at first. After striking out twice at Hannaford, our usual source of toilet paper before COVID-19 infected the world, my wife managed to score a six-roll pack at Whole Foods (the limit was two packs but there weren't anymore, or rather a clerk told her that the store stocked a certain number on the shelves a day and when that was gone that was it) and a couple of single rolls at the local co-op. However, she had to buy a different kind than she usually does—thinner and prone to shredding in the fingers.

After a little more legwork, I can't say I feel entirely secure yet about the national supply of toilet paper.

Coming back from a recent walk around our suburban neighborhood, my wife and I saw a car just back from the store apparently: in the garage was a large multi-roll pack of toilet paper on the car roof waiting to be squirreled safely away inside the Cape Cod house. As we approached our door, we saw that our next-door neighbor also had just returned with his quarry: sitting on the vinyl cover stretched across the bed of his white Dodge Ram 1500 was a large multi-roll pack of toilet paper.

A week and a half later we were back at Hannaford, this time on an evening midweek. And to our surprise, the ninety feet of shelves were three-quarters full! "It looks a lot better than it did a couple of weeks ago, doesn't it?" a clerk stocking the packs of toilet paper said to us, beaming behind his mask

(I could tell by his eyes). It certainly did. But I was far from beaming behind my mask.

I'm thoroughly chastened by this whole toilet paper mess. My parents lived through the Great Depression in their youth, and now that the world seems to be entering another one, I feel like I'm becoming them, always seeing what could be reused or salvaged or done without.

Maybe someday some of us may be forced to ask, like the old popular song of nearly a century ago, but with a slight twist at the end: "Brother, can you spare a roll?" But if we were all brothers (and sisters), we wouldn't have to ask. The grocery store shelves would be bursting with roll upon roll of that modern wonder, and at least attending to nature's calling would once again be carefree.

«[Previous Article](#) [Table of Contents](#) [Next Article](#)»

Jeff Plude, a former daily newspaper reporter and editor, is a freelance writer and editor. He lives near Albany, New York.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)

