Data Snacking

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"I know you spend a lot of time studying workplace demographics. As a writer and avid reader, doesn't it bother you that kids today don't read like we used to do?" Thus began a rather interesting conversation with an industry analyst. Full disclosure: This woman was a Baby Boomer, just like me. "I mean, they don't read novels, they don't read short stories," she continued; "How can we expect them to make informed decisions?"

In an earlier post I talked about the huge and critical gap that exists between "what we believe to be true" and "what we know to be true." This was one of those moments when I felt compelled to actively bridge the gap.

I recently read a report issued by the Pew Research Center called, "Younger Americans' Reading and Library Habits." The report reached some terrific (and rather unexpected) conclusions:

- 83% of Americans between the ages of 16 and 29 read a book in the past year. Some 75% read a print book, 19% read an e-book, and 11% listened to an audiobook.
- Among Americans who read e-books, those under age 30 are more likely to read their e-books on a cell phone (41%) or computer (55%) than on an e-book reader such as a Kindle (23%) or tablet (16%).
- Overall, 47% of younger Americans read long-form e-content such as books, magazines or newspapers. E-content readers under age 30 are more likely than older e-content readers to say that they are reading more these days due to the availability of e-content (40% vs. 28%).
- 60% of Americans under age 30 used the library in the past year. Some 46% used the library for research, 38% borrowed books (print books, audiobooks, or e-books), and 23% borrowed newspapers, magazines, or journals.
- Many of these young readers do not know they can borrow an e-book from a library, and a majority of them express the wish they could do so on pre-loaded e-readers. Some 10% of the e-book readers in this group have borrowed an e-book from a library and, among those who have not borrowed an e-book, 52% said they were unaware they could do so. Some 58% of those under age 30 who do not currently borrow e-books from libraries say they would be "very" or "somewhat" likely to borrow pre-loaded e-readers if their library offered that service.

My point with this (besides the fact that the report is both uplifting and fascinating) is that young people do read. They don't necessarily read the same way that adults do, preferring e-

readers and phones to paper books, but they *do* read. Hey, I myself read on my phone: in fact, I recently read Stephen King's *The Stand* on my phone just to prove that (1) I could, (2) I wouldn't go blind, and (3) it was an enjoyable experience. I now read (and buy) traditional paper books, and eBooks on my Kindle Paperwhite, my iPad, my iPhone, and my laptop. All are equally good media for reading – and in the same spirit that the best camera you have is the one you have with you, the best book is the one you have with you. I am *never* without a good book to read because I have about a hundred of them at any time in my phone.

But there's another issue that I want to address in this essay, and that is the phenomenon that has come to be known as "Data Snacking." Data Snacking refers to the practice of reading small chunks of consumable content from a wide array of sources rather than a single piece of long-form content from one book. I routinely hear older adults lamenting the loss of reading skills, the demise of critical thinking, the inability of young people to focus, and the second tier concern of not being able to string a cogent sentence together. To each of these I respond, *Rubbish.* But rather than leave it at that let me address each of these concerns individually, after which you may draw your own conclusions.

As the author of well over 60 books I am hyper-aware of the extent to which people of all ages read. I pay attention to what they read, how often they read, why they read, and when. On airplanes my eyes are magnetically drawn to the book in the hands of people as they board. And I am particularly cognizant of kids' reading behaviors.

Kids do read – as I said, not the way that we did when we were kids, but they do read. They read books, social media posts, and e-mail from their friends. They read magazines. They read text messages from their friends. And while I would love it if they read more long-form literature, I have to admit that I was well into adulthood before I found myself wanting to return to the classics and read them through the eyes of a person with a little experience under his belt and more of an opportunity and ability to understand the nuance of the story.

Furthermore, kids are able to think critically, and while they don't always do it alone, they do it extremely well as a group. I have often watched groups of kids in high schools and universities dealing with a thorny challenge and noted how they relied on each other's insights to reach a highly nuanced conclusion.

And as for young people's inability to focus – really? Here they are, bombarded by a plethora of simultaneous media inputs, yet they manage to deal with all of them well. I can't do that; it's hard enough for me to work with music playing in the background. Yet they manage, and manage well.

Kids today engage in a practice called Data Snacking, which simply means that they source information from a variety of places, thus giving them a far richer and broader view of the topic

they are researching. And before they accept the information from a source they first vet it with their friends to make sure that they agree with its veracity.

In fact, this is how I work. I don't rely on a single source for the work I do; I rely on as many as possible, because only then can I get a broad sense of truth. Otherwise my source is the opinion of a single person, and while it may be factually correct it will most certainly be biased, even if only mildly. I'd rather have a range of sources. And that's how Millennials behave: They data snack. I like that.

Incidentally, if you'd like a good example of this, read the Stanford White Paper about Coca-Cola's Happiness Machine. You can find it [here](#).

Thanks for reading.