
Do You Think You're Reading Brain Food?



By Neil Bearden , INSEAD Associate Professor of Decision Sciences

Are we being intellectually nourished by the vast amounts of witty and anecdotal content proliferating on the internet? Or are we just killing time?

I don't need to give you some statistic I could surely find with a quick Google search to convince you that we're exposed to a bizarre, astronomical quantity of media each day. No doubt I could find *some* number that tells the truth: we expose ourselves to a lot. What I'm not sure of is why.

I've been observing myself – psychologists used to call this type of research introspection – and trying to figure out how much of what I consume I actually retain.

I also watch other people and wonder what they're getting out of staring at their electronic devices all the time. If two people put their phones down for a few minutes and talked about what they'd been reading, I suspect it'd go something like this:

“What are you doing right now? You're always looking down at your phone.”

“Just the usual stuff – at this moment looking at some dude’s blog.”

“You know that your body looks like it’s becoming permanently distorted, don’t you? Your neck is angled forward about ten degrees more than it used to be, and your right hand is always out in front of you – palm facing up – even when it’s not holding your phone.”

“Very funny.”

“I’m serious – what are you always reading?”

“Mostly I find links in my Twitter feed and follow those. If you follow the right people, you can easily find really great stuff.”

“Ok – what did you read about yesterday?”

“Yesterday? Why?”

“What did you learn yesterday during your Twitter travels?”

“I don’t know. Who cares?”

“I’m just doing an experiment. Try to remember what you read yesterday.”

“I honestly don’t remember what I read yesterday.”

“You were staring at your phone for nearly every free second – I was watching you – and you can’t remember what you read?”

“I read some news. About Russia and Ukraine. And a lot of other stuff – I can’t really recall right now.”

“Besides the news headlines, what do you remember from the past week? I mean of the stuff that you read when you’ve been mesmerised by your phone.”

“I don’t know, but your experiment is annoying. I’ll remember that.”

“Did you hear the story about the Ukrainian guy in Crimea who gave a Russian soldier a cigarette?”

“I don’t think so.”

“The guy was watching a group of Russian soldiers and just having a cigarette by himself when one of the soldiers approached him and asked if he could bum a smoke. The guy pulled out his pack, gave the soldier one, and said, “Be careful these things can kill you.” The soldier responded, “Then I’d better not because that might lead to war, and both of us might get killed.” Apparently, they both started laughing so hysterically that the soldier’s commanding officer came over to see what was going on. It seems he didn’t find their little joke so funny, and broke up the smoke break.”

“What’d he do?”

“He just told the soldier to go back to where he was before and keep quiet.”

“What about the Ukrainian guy?”

“I don’t know. Nothing, I guess.”

“Do you think there will be war?”

“How can I know? I don’t have a clue, but I obviously hope not.”

“Do you think a soldier asking for a cigarette could actually lead to a war? I don’t mean because the cigarette kills him. Obviously, it wouldn’t. But what if the Ukrainian guy had said “no”, and the situation had somehow escalated?”

“Anything can happen.”

“It’s like the First World War. Besides some history nerds, I don’t think I know anyone who really understands what caused that war. A lot of people know that some Archduke of Austria was assassinated somewhere in the Balkans, and that somehow that got the ball rolling. That seems to be pretty much what most people I know say when I “experiment” on them.”

“Yeah, that’s about all I know too. It just seems crazy that one guy getting shot resulted in that enormous mess.”

“Surely it wasn’t really so simple.”

“Surely.”

“But even though most people can’t recall the details, they do remember the basic story about the Archduke’s assassination leading to the war to end all

wars.”

“What if tomorrow you read that war broke out because a soldier tried to bum a smoke – would you remember that the next day?”

“I’m pretty sure I would.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, I’m pretty sure I’d remember why the next world war started.”

“What if the cigarette-bumming incident didn’t lead to war? What if it just led to, well, nothing? Would you be more likely to remember that or some so-called expert’s analysis you read on your phone there?”

“Probably the dumb cigarette story.”

“Help me out: if you don’t remember nearly anything you read, why are you always hunched over your phone reading and destroying your posture? What’s the point?”

“I just like to read, I guess. It keeps me occupied, distracts me. What else is there to do?”

“One more experiment: this time a thought experiment. If you were one of the people writing that stuff you’re always reading, how would you feel if you found out that almost no one remembered what you wrote?”

“I don’t know – probably not great.”

“Did you hear that the soldier and the Ukrainian guy are now Facebook friends? Someone took a picture of them talking, posted it on Facebook, and they were then connected by a series of friends who put names to faces. You’ll probably see the picture in your feed – it’s gone viral already.”

“I didn’t hear about that.”

“I bet you’ll remember the incident tomorrow.”

“Yeah, anecdotes – even little silly ones – seem to stick more than most of the other stuff I read. Maybe if some of the bloggers paid attention to that fact, I’d perform a little better in your first experiment.”

“You can’t stay off your phone for five minutes, can you? What are you reading now?”

“I’m not entirely sure, actually. Something about a couple of guys talking about two others guys smoking cigarettes in Crimea.”

“Perhaps you should get off your phone for a minute, and try doing some real work.”

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