Up Your Sales Without a Lot of Reading, Den E. Potter, Dean E. Potter, 1997, 0965799603, 9780965799607, . .

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It takes the average reader just seven hours to read the final book in Suzanne Collins's "Hunger Games" trilogy on the Kobo e-readerâ€"about 57 pages an hour. Nearly 18,000 Kindle readers have highlighted the same line from the second book in the series: "Because sometimes things happen to people and they're not equipped to deal with them." And on Barnes & Noble's Nook, the first thing that most readers do upon finishing the first "Hunger Games" book is to download the next one.

For centuries, reading has largely been a solitary and private act, an intimate exchange between the reader and the words on the page. But the rise of digital books has prompted a profound shift in the way we read, transforming the activity into something measurable and quasi-public. Eben Shapiro explains on Lunch Break. Photo: AP.

In the past, publishers and authors had no way of knowing what happens when a reader sits down with a book. Does the reader quit after three pages, or finish it in a single sitting? Do most readers skip over the introduction, or read it closely, underlining passages and scrawling notes in the margins? Now, e-books are providing a glimpse into the story behind the sales figures, revealing not only how many people buy particular books, but how intensely they read them.

The major new players in e-book publishingâ€"Amazon, Apple and Googleâ€"can easily track how far readers are getting in books, how long they spend reading them and which search terms they use to find books. Book apps for tablets like the iPad, Kindle Fire and Nook record how many times readers open the app and how much time they spend reading. Retailers and some publishers are beginning to sift through the data, gaining unprecedented insight into how people engage with books.

Publishing has lagged far behind the rest of the entertainment industry when it comes to measuring consumers' tastes and habits. TV producers relentlessly test new shows through focus groups; movie studios run films through a battery of tests and retool them based on viewers' reactions. But in publishing, reader satisfaction has largely been gauged by sales data and reviewsâ€"metrics that offer a postmortem measure of success but can't shape or predict a hit. That's beginning to change as publishers and booksellers start to embrace big data, and more tech companies turn their sights on publishing.

Barnes & Noble, which accounts for 25% to 30% of the e-book market through its Nook e-reader, has recently started studying customers' digital reading behavior. Data collected from Nooks reveals, for example, how far readers get in particular books, how quickly they read and how

readers of particular genres engage with books. Jim Hilt, the company's vice president of e-books, says the company is starting to share their insights with publishers to help them create books that better hold people's attention.

The stakes are high for the company as it seeks a greater share of the e-book market. Sales of Nook devices rose 45% this past fiscal year, and e-book sales for the Nook rose 119%. Overall, Nook devices and e-books generated $1.3 billion, compared with $880 million the previous year. Microsoft recently invested $300 million for a 17.6% stake in the Nook.

Mr. Hilt says that the company is still in "the earliest stages of deep analytics" and is sifting through "more data than we can use." But the dataâ€"which focuses on groups of readers, not individualsâ€"has already yielded some useful insights into how people read particular genres. Some of the findings confirm what retailers already know by glancing at the best-seller lists. For example, Nook users who buy the first book in a popular series like "Fifty Shades of Grey" or "Divergent," a young-adult series by Veronica Roth, tend to tear through all the books in the series, almost as if they were reading a single novel.

Barnes & Noble has determined, through analyzing Nook data, that nonfiction books tend to be read in fits and starts, while novels are generally read straight through, and that nonfiction books, particularly long ones, tend to get dropped earlier. Science-fiction, romance and crime-fiction fans often read more books more quickly than readers of literary fiction do, and finish most of the books they start. Readers of literary fiction quit books more often and tend skip around between books.

Those insights are already shaping the types of books that Barnes & Noble sells on its Nook. Mr. Hilt says that when the data showed that Nook readers routinely quit long works of nonfiction, the company began looking for ways to engage readers in nonfiction and long-form journalism. They decided to launch "Nook Snaps," short works on topics ranging from weight loss and religion to the Occupy Wall Street movement.

Pinpointing the moment when readers get bored could also help publishers create splashier digital editions by adding a video, a Web link or other multimedia features, Mr. Hilt says. Publishers might be able to determine when interest in a fiction series is flagging if readers who bought and finished the first two books quickly suddenly slow down or quit reading later books in the series.

Some authors welcome the prospect. Novelist Scott Turow says he's long been frustrated by the industry's failure to study its customer base. "I once had an argument with one of my publishers when I said, 'I've been publishing with you for a long time and you still don't know who buys my books,' and he said, 'Well, nobody in publishing knows that,' " says Mr. Turow, president of the Authors Guild. "If you can find out that a book is too long and you've got to be more rigorous in cutting, personally I'd love to get the information."

Others worry that a data-driven approach could hinder the kinds of creative risks that produce great literature. "The thing about a book is that it can be eccentric, it can be the length it needs to be, and that is something the reader shouldn't have anything to do with," says Jonathan Galassi, president and publisher of Farrar, Straus & Giroux. "We're not going to shorten 'War and Peace' because someone didn't finish it."

Publishers are only just beginning to mull over the potential uses for e-reading data. Many are skeptical that analytics can aid in the industry's ongoing battle to woo consumers who are increasingly distracted by games and social media. But at a time when traditional publishers are losing ground to tech giants like Amazon and Apple, better analytics seem to offer tantalizing possibilities.

Amazon, in particular, has an advantage in this fieldâ€"it's both a retailer and a publisher, which puts the company in a unique position to use the data it gathers on its customers' reading habits. It's no secret that Amazon and other digital book retailers track and store consumer information detailing what books are purchased and read. Kindle users sign an agreement granting the company

permission to store information from the device—including the last page you've read, plus your bookmarks, highlights, notes and annotations—in its data servers.

Amazon can identify which passages of digital books are popular with readers, and shares some of this data publicly on its website through features such as its "most highlighted passages" list. Readers digitally "highlight" selections using a button on the Kindle; they can also opt to see the lines commonly highlighted by other readers as they read a book. Amazon aggregates these selections to see what gets underlined the most. Topping the list is the line from the "Hunger Games" trilogy. It is followed by the opening sentence of "Pride and Prejudice."

Some privacy watchdogs argue that e-book users should be protected from having their digital reading habits recorded. "There's a societal ideal that what you read is nobody else's business," says Cindy Cohn, legal director for the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a nonprofit group that advocates for consumer rights and privacy. "Right now, there's no way for you to tell Amazon, I want to buy your books, but I don't want you to track what I'm reading."

EFF has pressed for legislation to prevent digital book retailers from handing over information about individuals' reading habits as evidence to law enforcement agencies without a court's approval. Earlier this year, California instituted the "reader privacy act," which makes it more difficult for law-enforcement groups to gain access to consumers' digital reading records. Under the new law, agencies must get a court order before they can require digital booksellers to turn over information revealing which books their customers have browsed, purchased, read and underlined. The American Civil Liberties Union and EFF, which partnered with Google and other organizations to push for the legislation, are now seeking to enact similar laws in other states.

Bruce Schneier, a cyber-security expert and author, worries that readers may steer clear of digital books on sensitive subjects such as health, sexuality and security—including his own works—out of fear that their reading is being tracked. "There are a gazillion things that we read that we want to read in private," Mr. Schneier says.

There are some 40 million e-readers and 65 million tablets in use in the U.S., according to analysts at Forrester Research. In the first quarter of 2012, e-books generated $282 million in sales, compared with $230 million for adult hardcover books, the Association of American Publishers recently found.

Meanwhile, the shift to digital books has fueled an arms race among digital start-ups seeking to cash in on the massive pool of data collected by e-reading devices and reading apps. New e-reading services, which allow readers to purchase and store books in a digital library and read them on different devices, have some of the most sophisticated reader tracking software. The digital reading platform Copia, which has 50,000 subscribers, collects detailed demographic and reading data—including the age, gender and school affiliation of people who bought particular titles, as well as how many times the books were downloaded, opened and read—and shares its findings with publishers. Copia aggregates the data, so that individual users aren't identifiable, and shares that information with publishers that request it.

Kobo, which makes digital reading devices and operates an e-reading service that stocks 2.5 million books and has more than eight million users, has recently started looking at how readers as a whole engage with particular books and genres. The company tracks how many hours readers spend on particular titles and how far they get. Kobo recently found, for example, that most readers who started George R.R. Martin's fantasy novel "A Dance With Dragons" finished the book, and spent an average of 20 hours reading it, a relatively fast read for a 1,040-page novel.

Some publishers are already beginning to market test books digitally, before releasing a print edition. Earlier this year, Sourcebooks, which publishes 250 titles a year, began experimenting with a new model of serial, online publishing. Sourcebooks has released early online editions for half a dozen titles, ranging from romance to young adult to nonfiction books, and has solicited questions and suggestions from readers. Eventually, readers' feedback will be incorporated into the print

version.

Scholastic, which publishes popular young-adult fiction such as Harry Potter and "The Hunger Games," created online message boards and interactive games connected to its popular series "39 Clues." The online game and message board, which has 1.9 million registered users, allows the publisher to track which story lines and characters are resonating with young readers. David Levithan, Scholastic's publisher and editorial director, says the online feedback has shaped the ongoing "39 Clues" series and helped to turn it into a global franchise with more than 15 million copies in print.

Coliloquy's digital books, which are available on Kindle, Nook and Android e-readers, have a "choose-your-own-adventure"-style format, allowing readers to customize characters and plot lines. The company's engineers aggregate and pool the data gleaned from readers' selections and send it to the authors, who can adjust story lines in their next books to reflect popular choices.

Coliloquy developed its software through Amazon's Kindle data developer program, which allows outside companies to create interactive content for Kindle. Their proprietary data platform draws on complex algorithms, similar to gaming software, that lets readers choose from different narrative pathways.

The company hired six editors and five technology and product developers and began recruiting authors from a range of genres, including romance, nonfiction, young-adult fantasy and erotica. Since launching this past January, the company has released eight titles, and is expanding into crime fiction, legal thrillers and experimental fiction. Mr. Lue and Ms. Rutherford declined to provide sales figures for Coliloquy's titles, citing a nondisclosure agreement with Amazon. But they say more than 90% of readers who buy Colloquy's books, which range from $2.99 to $7.99, finish reading them, and 67% reread the books.

In "Parish Mail," Kira Snyder's young adult mystery series set in New Orleans, readers can decide whether the teenage protagonist solves crimes by using magic or by teaming up with a police detective's cute teenage son. Readers of "Great Escapes," an erotic romance series co-written by Linda Wisdom and Lynda K. Scott, can customize the hero's appearance and the intensity of the love scenes. A recent report from Coliloquy showed that the ideal hero for "Great Escapes" readers is tall with black hair and green eyes, a rugged, burly build and a moderately but not overly hairy chest.

In Tawna Fenske's romantic caper "Getting Dumped"â€"which centers on a young woman who finds work at a landfill after getting laid off from her high-profile job at the county's public relations officeâ€"readers can choose which of three suitors they want the heroine to pursue. The most recent batch of statistics showed that 53.3% chose Collin, a Hugh Grant type; 16.8% chose Pete, the handsome but unavailable co-worker; and 29.7% of readers liked Daniel, the heroine's emotionally distant boyfriend.

"So much of the time, it's an editor and agent and publisher telling you, 'This is what readers want,' but this is hands-on reader data," says Ms. Fenske, 37, who lives in Bend, Ore. "I've always wondered, did that person buy it and stop after the first three pages? Now I can see they bought it and read it in the first week."

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