

Knowing your readers

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Ten years ago, I [studied readers](#) of the then popular Left Behind series of Christian apocalyptic novels. If I conducted that study today, I would potentially have access to far more objective data about readers than I did. How quickly do they read? Where do they stop reading? What passages do they mark? Do they write notes in the margins?

E-books are providing companies with the opportunity for all of this information and more about people who use e-readers like the Nook and Kindle. It is “more data than we can use,” [says](#) Jim Hilt, vice president of e-books at Barnes & Noble.

As a researcher, the thought of all that data makes my palms itchy. It could transform the mysterious act of reading into something quantifiable and analyzable. What if I could have used numbers to back up my too-vague suggestion that readers got bored by the Left Behind series after about five books?(“Fifty-two percent of readers stopped reading between pages 157 and 175 of Apollyon.”) That would have been cool.

For centuries, reading has been a private act, a quiet transaction between text and reader, for better or for worse. [An article](#) in the Wall Street Journal argues that the data e-books make available could potentially make for “better” books, as authors get more information about how their readers engage their texts and why. For book marketers and editors, the data offers ways to think about their work with more understanding and less conjecture.

That’s all well and good, I suppose. Though there is the risk that more people will try to manipulate this data to produce even worse books (in the name of being better) than they do now.

But what if you could collect data about how people were hearing your sermon as you were preaching it? Sixty-three percent of the congregation stopped listening when you said the word “Pauline.” Only 25 percent of them checked back in when you told the anecdote about the storm that flooded your neighbor’s basement.

Thirty-two percent wrote down the word “healing” in the margins of their bulletins.

How would this affect the way you preach? On the one hand, you can see homiletics professors everywhere rubbing their hands with glee at finally being able to use hard data to demonstrate the value of a structured sequence. On the other hand, does this data confuse the already difficult work of saying what you mean, preaching from your life and heart, using your intuition and listening to the text?

Would knowing that your congregation was drifting off make you sharper? Or just more anxious?