# DESIGNING BOOKS FOR TOMORROW'S READERS: HOW MILLENNIALS CONSUME CONTENT

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By Erin L. Cox

The media often depicts Millennials as interested in games and apps more than reading, as entirely digitally focused, and as connecting with their peers exclusively through social media, but is that picture accurate? According to new research by publishing industry software and service provider Publishing Technology, Millennials are not as digitally inclined as earlier thought.

## 1. Introduction

Millennials are commonly thought of as being entitled, perhaps lazy, digital-only, living with their parents, unwilling to spend money, and upending traditional media, entertainment, and brands with their fickle preferences and taste. Journalist Larissa Faw, who writes about Millennials for *Media Post* and *Forbes*, describes the misconceptions about Millennials as stemming from poor data analysis. "The misconception starts when one data point is misread and then it is repeated time and again," said Faw. "Then the media continues to report these assumptions and doesn't question the source or the common sense of these data points."

"The Millennial Generation," formerly referred to as Generation Y, was a term coined by authors William Strauss and Neil Howe in their book *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069* to define the children born between 1982 and 2004. This, the largest generation in history,with 77 million members in the US alone, is just the next in a cycle of generations defined by and acting in response to "social moments," when historic events are "radically altering their social environment."

And the criticism and misconceptions about Millennials is merely a time-honored tradition of the older generation critiquing the young. In Clive Thompson's *Wired* article "Congrats Millennials. Now Its Your Turn to be Vilified," he reminds us that "back in the early '90s, boomer pundits across America declared Generation X a group of apathetic, coddled, entitled slackers." Thompson goes on: "The real pattern here [between generations] isn't any big cultural shift. It's a much more venerable algorithm: How middle-aged folks freak out over niggling cultural differences between themselves and twentysomethings. In the '50s, senators fretted that comic books would 'offer courses in murder, mayhem, [and] robbery' for youth. In the '80s, parents worried that Dungeons and Dragons would 'pollute and destroy our children's minds'—and that the Walkman would turn them into antisocial drones. This pattern is as old as the hills. As Chaucer noted in *The Canterbury Tales,* 'Youth and elde are often at debaat.'"

In order to better connect with and sell to this audience who is coming of age now and will be dictating the marketplace for the next 10-15 years, we must first understand how they act, what inspires them, and what they want.

According to research Faw put together, 64% of Millennials listen to the radio daily, 88% of which listen to traditional radio. While streaming video and television is popular, 80% watch TV regularly, 88% being traditional television. And, while they are not brand exclusive, they do like quality products and aren't willing to compromise with a lesser product or intermediate option. For example, Millennials are more likely to live with their parents or rent apartments as they save up money for the home they want rather than buy a starter home. Understanding the desires of Millennials will help publishers better create and market to this audience with their products.

## 2. Summary of Research
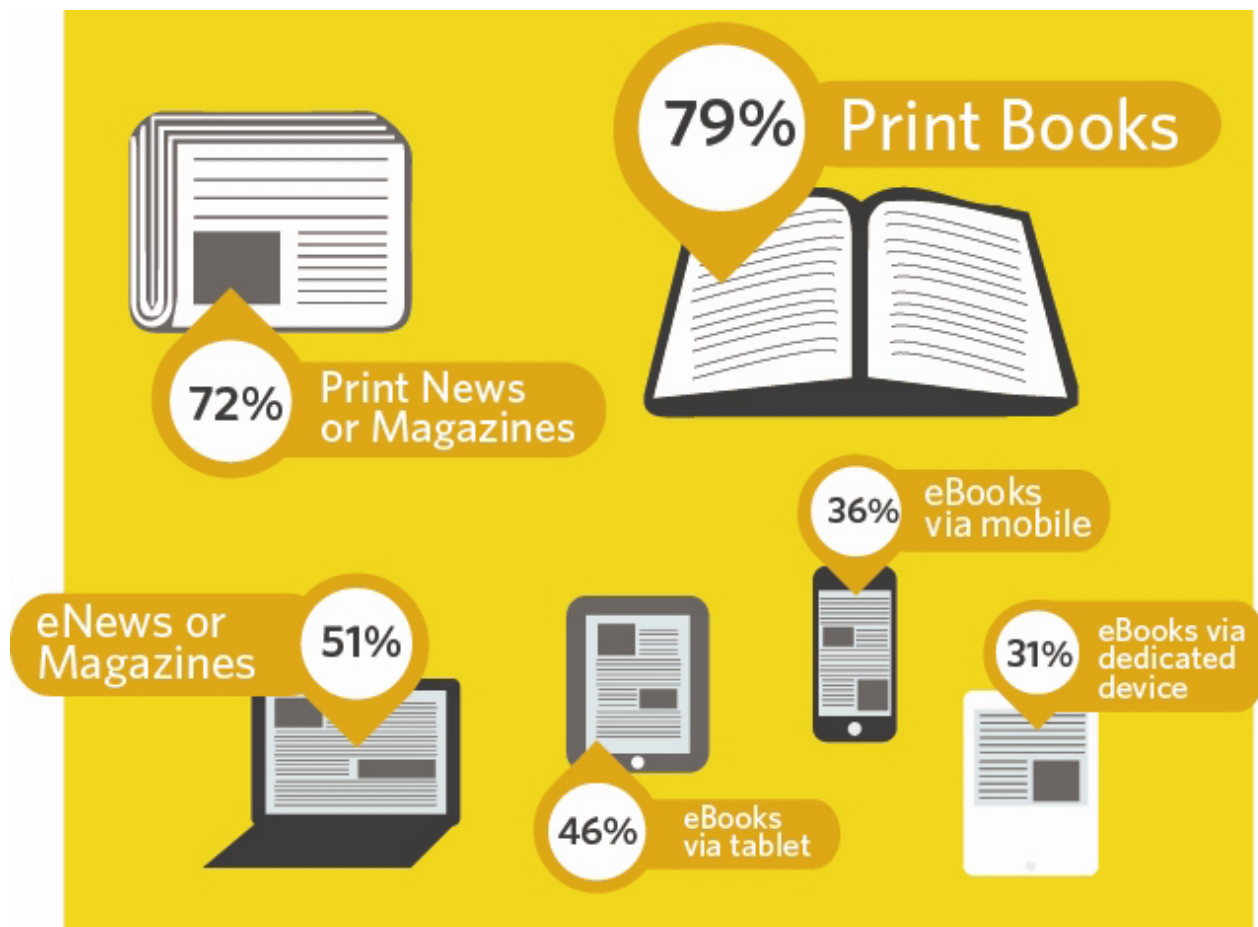


While Millennials were "born digital," with the rise of technology and supercomputing being their "social moment," they are not solely interested in consuming media and living their lives digitally. Instead, as the survey Publishing Technology commissioned outlined, they have better integrated technology into their lives, using both physical and digital products regularly.

The survey, which polled 1,000 US consumers between the ages of 18 and 34, found that in the last year, nearly twice as many respondents had read a print book (79%) than an ebook on any device – the closest being a tablet (46%). Showing no strong allegiance, young Americans also reported reading ebooks on personal computers (37%), mobile phones (36%) and dedicated ereaders (31%). And, 36% of those polled even spent more money on print books in 2014 than they had the previous year.

As reported in *The Washington Post*, though the cost of print textbooks has risen 82% in the last ten years, students generally still prefer print versus digital products. Readers tend to retain information better from a print format and tend to skim less. Not to say that these print textbook users don't rely on additional information online, they do.

Randy Petway, EVP of Global Product Strategy for Publishing Technology, identified Millennials as the "two-screen generation." Most of this age group grew up with tablets, smartphones, and

ereaders, and have always integrated digital aspects into their lives — mobile reading, games, streaming video, social media. For people from older generations who were raised in a one-screen world, the "always online" behavior of Millennials is often misinterpreted.

For example, though the media describes Millennials as living only online, offline communication is vital to book discovery and sharing for this age group. Millennials mostly discover print and ebooks by word of mouth referrals (45%) and social media (34%), and a quarter of those polled reported finding books through browsing in public libraries and brick-and-mortar bookstores.

Millennials readers are inclined to share their likes and dislikes. They report sharing what they've read via word of mouth (54%), social media (20%), and online communities (18%). And, they would like to share more: 31% of respondents said that the ability to freely share ebooks with others would encourage them to read more digital products.

And, much like any age group, price promotions (55%), free print/ebook bundling (37%), free devices (36%), and shorter content or pay-per-chapter books (10%) would encourage them to read more ebooks.

Michael Cairns, CEO of Publishing Technology, said, "This study shows that publishers can be heartened that reading is still a vital part of the Millennial media landscape. Testing our assumptions about a generation of young people born and raised during the digital era, 18-34 year-olds are however not as 'online-only' as we often assumed. This rising cohort of book-buyers relies on their peers for suggestions of what to read, often prefers cheaper, smaller bites they can share freely, and expects to read when and where they want regardless of format or platform. To engage with these readers now and cultivate them for tomorrow, publishers will want to target multiple channels for their content and integrate with this generation's social lives, both on and offline."

# 3. Book Discovery, Social Sharing, and Online Communities

**45%** 💬 Word-of-mouth

**34%** 👍 Social Media

**32%** 📖 eReading apps

**31%** http:// eRetailer websites

**28%** OPEN Physical retail shops

**24%** 🏛 Public libraries

**21%** 👥 Online Communities

What Millennials read is influenced by a number of factors from word of mouth to browsing in bookstores to online communities and social media. Two ways that publishers are tapping into the marketplace and connecting to readers directly are 1) creating social media campaigns for their titles and imprints and 2) building and maintaining online communities.

In 2013, Amazon purchased the popular online community Goodreads for $150 million, underscoring the power of online communities to influence reader interests. In turn, publishers saw an opportunity to track trends that will give them an advantage both when marketing their backlist and acquiring for the future. In a 2013 study commissioned by Publishing Technology and conducted by Bowker Market Research, it was reported that the number of publisher-owned online communities was set to more than double over the next two years with "64% of respondents convinced that their investment is already paying off and [will] continue to do so by providing good marketing support to sales channels."

Tor.com was one of those online communities that stood out as particularly successful. While most online communities run by publishers focus on promoting and interacting only with their own writers and books, Tor.com was conceived in 2008 as publisher-neutral, promoting books from Tor and other publishers, as well as television, film, and games. Offering a platform for discussion on all things science fiction and fantasy–related, the site provided a place for interesting conversations on these subjects and direct interaction with fans of sci-fi and fantasy.

Through these direct connections with potential readers, the Tor publishing imprint was able to share news of their upcoming books, share one-off stories, and engage a powerful readership in a much more subtle way. Now boasting 1.5 million readers a month, Tor.com has an incredible audience to which it can promote their authors.
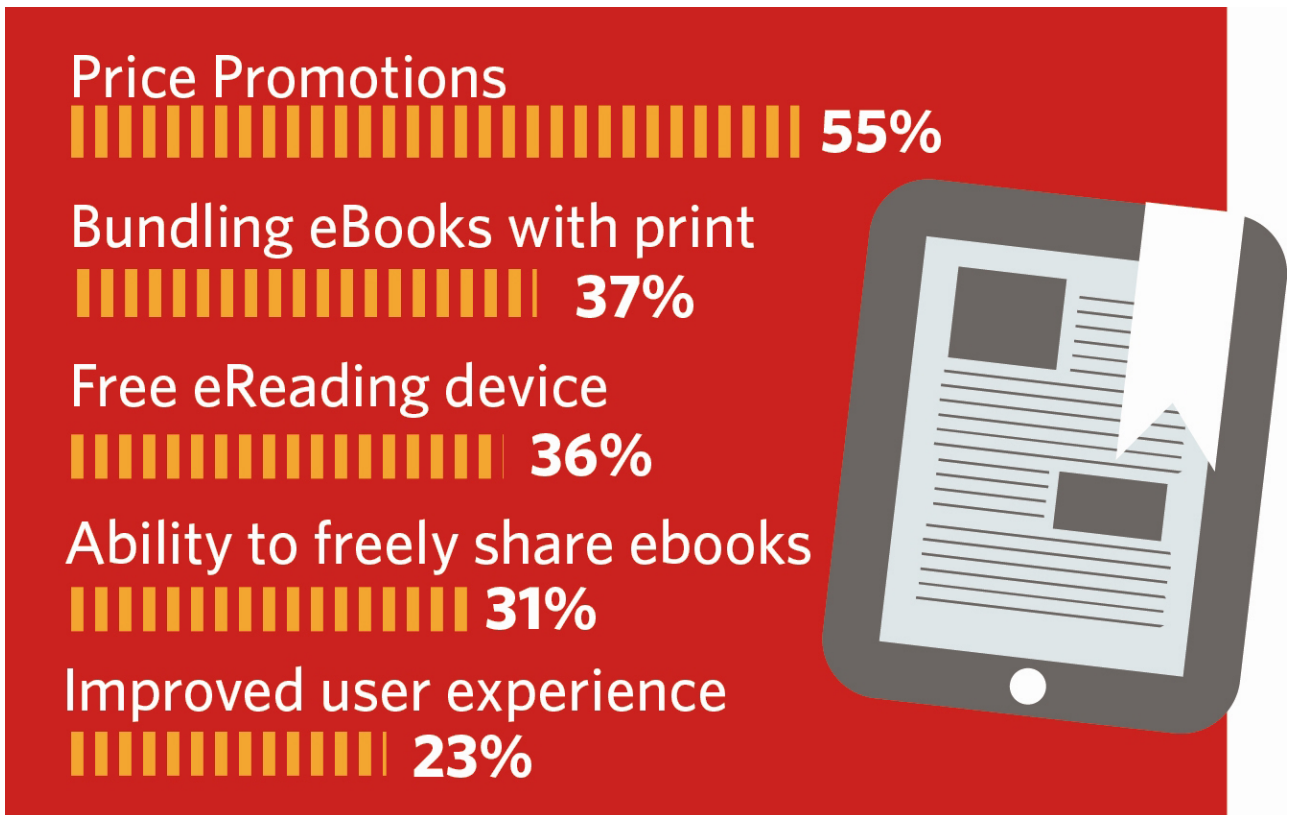
In May 2014, Tor.com announced they would be begin publishing original novellas and short stories to cater, in part, to the community they have developed online. A popular length in the sci-fi/fantasy genre, the cost of traditional publishing has all but pushed short stories and novellas out of the marketplace. According to Irene Gallo, Associate Publisher at Tor.com, they wanted to provide the opportunity for writers to be able to write the stories at the length in which "the story deserved to be written," not forcing them to expand the work to a full-length novel or edit for a short story. They also wanted the freedom of flexibility in when and how they published these works by not being beholden to a seasonal catalog schedule and being able to take advantage of trends and what fans were commenting on. Most importantly, they wanted to learn as much as possible and be free to change directions easily to respond to reader interests and the market.

Another example of a publisher that expanded beyond its own doors is Scholastic with its This is Teen online community. Emily Morrow, Assistant Marketing Manager at Scholastic, created and manages the very popular #IreadYA Twitter hashtag for This is Teen, which has over 175,000 fans across all social media platforms. "Our goal with these types of campaigns is always to create a statement or a movement that we think is important to share, and that we believe readers and book lovers of all ages can get behind," said Morrow.

"[This] has probably been our biggest success to date. We were overwhelmed with the volume of positive responses we saw on social media the first year, which encouraged us to make this an annual event. This May will be our third year! We've also had success with our smaller-scale holiday-themed offshoot of #IreadYA, which we call #IgiftYA." Started predominantly to promote their young adult titles, this hashtag has gone viral, being used to promote new releases from YA publishers and authors across the industry and for readers to share what they are reading, discover new writers, or connect with old favorites.

Publishers have reported direct sales impact from these types of campaigns, but how effective are they when it comes to actual reading? Yoav Lorch, founder and CEO of Total BooX said, "The titles that are most downloaded are the ones that aren't read. Users seem to get a lot of satisfaction from just downloading." Total BooX is a reading platform where a reader downloads a book for free and only pays for what they read. Participating publishers can see just how much of a book readers consume, where they stop and what compels them to continue reading. Much like market-testing a movie, Total BooX may give publishers the opportunity to find out if there are scenes or ideas that slow down or stop reading and give the authors the opportunity to revise.

## 4. Storytelling and Storyselling: Designing and Marketing Books to Digital Natives



Price Promotions **55%**
Bundling eBooks with print **37%**
Free eReading device **36%**
Ability to freely share ebooks **31%**
Improved user experience **23%**

While 79% of Millennials still read print books, ebook reading is on the rise with the increased sophistication of reading platforms, subscription models, and online retailers. With video games, apps, and movies competing with books for the time of the reader, publishers have designed new ways of telling stories and updating brands in order to tap into this audience.

In July 2014, a classic comic book character was killed off to the shock and outrage of many of his fans. Archie Andrews of Archie Comics was shot protecting a friend and memorialized by his friends in the final issue. Fans and media alike mourned the famous character and questioned what would happen to the Archie franchise with its namesake gone, but the goal, according to Jon Goldwater, co-CEO of Archie Comics, was "to do something that was impactful that would really resonate with the world and bring home just how important Archie is to everyone."

What he also hoped to do was revitalize a product with lagging sales and rebrand it for a new generation. The series *Life with Archie* had a "Pleasantville," 1950s feel to it that did not resonate with this new, tech-savvy generation. The company tested a new series that launched in 2013, *Afterlife with Archie*, which was the first Archie comic to be rated "teens and up" and featured the Archie characters in a zombie apocalypse. With a goal to appeal to hard-core comic fans while also tapping into a more mainstream audience, the gamble succeeded. The first seven issues sold out and the updated series has received rave reviews.

Another story re-imagined is that of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* by John Berendt, which was the first title released by [Metabook](#), a new digital publishing platform launched this spring. As the respondents to the Publishing Technology survey reported, embedded music or video (10%), interactive links to outside sources (10%), and improved overall reading experience (23%) would encourage these readers to read more ebooks. Benjamin Alfonsi, creative director of Metabook, noted that due to the competition with other digital media that has seized the digital and multimedia revolution, publishing was "losing a generation of readers." Where other publishers have been conservative, Metabook wanted to create an "all-out assault on the senses" by providing audio and video components. The goal is to make each Metabook a new kind of frictionless reading environment that allows readers to stay in this world without having to go to outside sources for more information or understanding.

For example, when their first title, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* — a non-fiction book based on real-life events that took place in Savannah, Georgia in the 1980s — was originally published in 1994, it featured no photographs of the actual people featured in the book because Berendt wanted to paint the picture for the reader in words. But in this new digital age where readers can simply do an internet search with the names and places featured in the book, that anonymity doesn't exist. Accordingly, when introducing the work for the new generation of readers, Berendt and Metabook wanted to provide readers with the  photographs and audio interviews Berendt did with his subjects, as well as news stories that are relevant to the story.

Derrick Schultz, Director of Digital Experience at [The Atavist](#), has created all kinds of enhanced ebooks and products both at The Atavist and the now-shuttered Atavist Books. What he found in his experience was that, even in digital products, readers focused not on the soundtracks and videos included, but on the story and atmosphere. And, once they discovered what the readers wanted, they discovered that selling digital products was actually the hardest problem to solve.

With Atavist Books, they worked with high-profile writers such as Karen Russell, to tap into her audience. They also staged live events, similar to book launches, where people could meet the writer, and the team at Atavist Books could download the book to whatever device the attendee might have. This solved the technical confusion some readers had, provided an immediacy to the book sales, and also became a way to build relationships with readers.

# 5. Curating Content and Events for Millennials



With 28% of Millennials discovering books by browsing in physical bookstores or through word of mouth (45%), it is important to get a sense of what attracts them or which recommendations resonate. Jessica Stockton Bagnulo, founder and co-owner of Greenlight Bookstore in Brooklyn, hosts events both in the store and in locations around the neighborhood. Greenlight Bookstore has become a curator for both content and discussion for their customers, many of whom are Millennials.

What Jessica discovered over the course of programming events for the last five years is that audiences tend to prefer discussions over traditional author readings. They come out to events to be a part of a larger conversation related to a particular book or author. Readers want the behind-the-scenes look at the writer's experience and the origin story of the book.

Raymond Braun, Social Marketing Manager of YouTube, and Taylor Trudon, Editor of Huffington Post Teen, said that the readers/viewers they interact with share that desire to really connect with content creators online. YouTube creators, of which there are tens of thousands, have millions of followers because they are authentic, share their lives, and interact directly with their audiences.

On Huffington Post Teen, Trudon noted that this generation not only wants to see behind the curtain, but they also expect brands to interact with them. With that in mind, Trudon created a sort of informal focus group of teens that she can talk to directly about trends or news. The level of engagement is high because Trudon has identified herself as the voice behind the brand and her audience knows they are talking directly to her.

Her Campus, co-founded by Publisher Windsor Hanger Western, is the top online community for college women around the world. The brand has gone one step further in order to connect with its audience by implementing a national-local content strategy with 230 local chapters on college campuses across the USA and 700 bloggers. Each chapters provides specific content and events for local readers in addition to the content provided by the national site. Because of this rich engagement with a very targeted audience, Her Campus has become a highly-desired marketing partner for brands trying to reach Millennials.

Brands often work with both Her Campus and YouTube creators through native advertising and live events that speak to the specific audience. Millennials are highly distrustful of advertising and can tell when they are being sold to, but if the product is something a creator would use or the sponsored content fits with the voice of the creator organically, the brand has a better chance of building trust with the audience. "Our readers don't care if it's sponsored, as long as it's good," Hanger Western said.

A few pitfalls publishers tend to fall into are creating rigid campaigns, making assumptions of what the audience wants, and not taking time to listen and react to feedback. Braun warned against this tactic of creating a marketing plan and blindly following it without examining whether or not it is working. Teens and Millennials love to talk back to brands, particularly through social media, and they will tell publishers when something isn't working. Also, through social media, publishers are able to react very quickly and cheaply to rising trends and responses.

Additionally, Braun, Trudon, and Hanger Western warned against using "teen speak" when talking to teens or Millennials. Millennials respond to authenticity and can tell when they are being talked down to.

# 6. Conclusion and Opportunities for Publishers

Just about everything we thought we knew about Millennials is wrong. This highly-engaged audience is eager for great stories and content, wants to participate in events, and wants to share the things they love with the world. As Jessica Stockton Bagnulo noted, Millennials are not ashamed of the things they like and there is a fandom for every topic, genre, and fascination. Publishers simply need to tap into these fandoms.

While market research has not been a huge focus for publishers in the past, with the rise of social media and ebook platforms like Total BooX, where publishers can view the real-time behavior of their readers, publishers and independent writers have the opportunity to talk to and share plans and content directly with readers to not only get them involved in the publishing process but also to get their feedback. These connections can help publishers avoid wasting money on campaigns or technology that may not achieve their goals.

Publishers also have new opportunities to create brand ambassadors that help sell their books through social media focus groups, popular hashtags, or partnering with well-known sites or creators to further their individual books or imprints.

What publishers need to remember when looking at how to reach Millennials is that they are interested in great content, ease of use, authenticity, personal connection to writers and brands, and a trusted brand/site/bookstore/person to help curate that content for them.

*For the full Millennials and Media report, additional coverage of the topic, and other market research and industry intelligence, please visit publishingtechnology.com/research.*

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