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Continuous Media “Snacking” — Bite Size Entertainment for an Attention-Deficit Age

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Just a few decades ago, educators and other observers were warning that the American attention span was growing dangerously short. Serious political debate had been sacrificed in favor of “sound bites.” Educators reported that students had difficulty maintaining focus on a subject — even for just a few minutes.

Well, it now looks like those minutes may be turning into seconds. *WIRED* magazine reports that younger Americans now constitute a culture of media “snacking” and “bite size” entertainment. Apple Computer’s iTunes service sells music by the song — not just the album. YouTube and similar Internet sites offer films and movies that often last a minute or less.

As *WIRED* reports:

Music, television, games, movies, fashion: We now devour our pop culture the same way we enjoy candy and chips - in conveniently packaged bite-size nuggets made to be munched easily with increased frequency and maximum speed. This is snack culture - and boy, is it tasty (not to mention addictive).

More:

Today, media snacking is a way of life. In the morning, we check news and tap out emails on our laptops. At work, we graze all day on videos and blogs. Back home, the giant HDTV is for 10-course feasting - say, an entire season of 24. In between are the morsels that fill those whenever minutes, as your mobile phone carrier calls them: a 30-second game on your Nintendo DS, a 60-second webisode on your cell, a three-minute podcast on your MP3 player.

Like Homer Simpson at the all-you-can-eat seafood buffet, we are capable of devouring whatever is in front of us - down to the plastic crustaceans - and still go fishing for Colbert clips at 3 am. (Mmm... truthiness.) But not all munchies are created equal. This 12-page menu lists the tastiest - and tiniest - offerings.

Several factors have been blamed for the shortened attention spans. Many blame television for the problem, noting that the pace of television programming and the structure of eight-minute segments between commercials trains the mind to expect shorter attention demands.

But, if television shortened the national attention span starting decades ago, the Internet and its massive media expansion seems to be producing an even shorter attention span.

All this may be great for the marketers, but it spells further challenge for educators, parents, and preachers. How will people be able to listen to a serious biblical sermon if their minds are set to pay attention only for a few minutes — or even less?

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