It's hard to keep up with the vernacular used to describe a given generation of people. I know that I'm considered to be part of Gen X. I feel like the only reason I know what age bracket a "Boomer" falls into comes by virtue of knowing the date World War II ended. Similarly, my familiarity with whatever "Gen Z" is only comes from the fact that I consume research on teaching students in Gen Z. Somewhere along the line, I was told that the bulk of my law school students fell into that category, and I ran with it. I had to look up the hypothetical years of Gen Z—those born from the mid-90's up to around 2010, if you're keeping score. If you're like me, and a great deal of our readers are, you're teaching a large number of law school students in the Gen Z category. I came across a study recently that I found rather interesting.

The study was conducted by a company named Jigsaw. Jigsaw is a research subsidiary of Google that "focuses on online politics and polarization."[1] The study hoped to look at the *information literacy* of Gen Z. After time, however, the project researchers all but abandoned that term based on what they were learning about how Gen Z was processing online information. For purposes of this blog, I did a deep dive to come up with a good definition of information literacy and, well, there were so many definitions out there that it was difficult to choose only one. There was a consistent theme, however. It's this simple idea of information processing as a filtration skill—the ability to filter bad from good, unreliable from reliable. Now that we know that, we can, like the researchers at Jigsaw, toss it out. The researchers, instead, described Gen Z's processing of online information as "information sensibility." The article describes this as "a 'socially informed' practice that relies on 'folk heuristics of credibility.'"[2]

> "Where older generations are out there struggling to fact-check information and cite sources, Gen Zers don't even bother. They just read the headlines and then speed-scroll to the comments, to see what everyone else says. They're outsourcing the determination of truth and importance to like-minded, trusted influencers. And if an article is too long, they just skip it…If they have a goal, Jigsaw found, it's to learn what they need to know to remain cool and conversant in their chosen social groups."[3]

The picture painted doesn't seem all that flattering at this point. However, the researchers point out that Gen Z still seems to know *how* to research and find scholarly sources of information when they want to, that just isn't what they are doing with their screen time. Researchers found that the bulk of Gen Z's engagement with online information was in "timepass" mode. In this mode, truth or falsity of information becomes unimportant.[4] When it does become important, such as the article's example of the war in Ukraine, that is when scrolling to the comments becomes the default mode of processing the information.[5]

This made me think of a study I'd read about in *The Shallows,* Nicholas Carr's Pulitzer-nominated book exploring how internet usage changes our brains. The researcher from this 2008 study says, "[Young people raised in the internet age] don't necessarily read a page from left to right and from top to bottom. They might instead skip around, scanning for pertinent information of interest."[6] Carr's book ties the way internet consumers navigate online to the brain's finite information processing power of "cognitive load." And this is a problem for all of us who spend a lot of time online. The internet is often a giant firehose of cognitive load and that changes our brain's processing. Says Carr, "Experiments indicate that as we reach

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[1] Adam Rogers, Google studied Gen Z. What they found is alarming., BUSINESS INSIDER, MSN.COM, https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/technology/ar-BB1oQBF4 (last visited July 22, 2024)

[2] *Id.*

[3] *Id.*

[4] *Id.*

[5] *Id.*

[6] Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* 9 (W.W. Norton 2010).

the limits of our working memory, it becomes harder to distinguish relevant information from irrelevant information, signal from noise. We become mindless consumers of information."[7]

At this point, you might be wondering where I'm going with the "lesson" part of this "brain lesson." Well, it brings me to this constant tension I feel as a teacher of future professionals: Do we adapt the road for the car or the car for the road? Both the article I've cited here and uncited portions of Carr's book indicate that the digitally native, digitally adjusted brain becomes inclined to skip over large blocks of text rather than trying to work to process all of it. But isn't deep processing the very thing we ask our students to do when we prescribe them significant chunks of textbook reading? We want our students to learn the information, suggesting we ought to teach to the way their brain works. Yet we also know that the real world contains lengthy and cluttered cases that they must carefully and patiently read through in order to fully and accurately process them for their clients' benefit. We have read the learning-science literature about the power of the so-called "mini-lecture" which puts information in smaller, 5-to-8-minute bites for the ease of student consumption. But you and I both know the practice of law and the trenches of the courtroom don't take breaks in neat and tidy 5-minute intervals.

And, finally, I come to this question: How much has the online consumption of information shaped me (and us) toward "information sensibility" and the "folk heuristic of credibility"? Do I neglect the difficult search for truth in favor of other, cognitively easy approaches? It has me wondering what I am really doing when I scan the comments to articles on weightier topics. Perhaps my internet consumption is moving me further down the generational alphabet, cognitively speaking. If Carr's book, in its breadth and depth, teaches us anything it's that the brain-shaping power of the internet doesn't discriminate by some artificial notion of generation.

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[7] *Id.* at 125.