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Are we in the age of the autodidact or the self-taught man?

Dan Matthews · Wednesday, March 8th, 2017

In philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's first novel, *Nausea*, the self-taught man is a library-dwelling character whose goal is to read through every book alphabetically. This self-taught man is a kind of autodidact, but according to Ohio University, there's an important difference between the indiscriminate self-taught man and the autodidact:

Being an autodidact does not mean simply reading a lot of books. Many people both inside and outside traditional structures of higher learning read dozens or even hundreds of books every year. You can't become a true autodidact unless you engage with the right kind of material and apply it to your life effectively.

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This difference is important because of the actions of the self-taught man. He's a self-proclaimed lover of humanity, a supposed humanist who says to the narrator, "You love them at heart, Monsieur, you love them as I do." But it turns out it's a good thing the narrator doesn't love people quite the same way the self-taught man does—he's a pedophile.

While at the library, the self-taught man is making advances on boys. The librarian gives the pedophile a bloody nose, but the narrator, convinced this pedophilia is a result of his humanism, defends the self-taught man. The narrator has been conned by the self-taught man, conned into believing he's a humanist. In what way is preying on minors a form of humanism? It's an ethical and moral aberration that spreads ripples of negative manipulation outward because of how it affects victims. Sartre's self-taught man doesn't apply his readings toward a pursuit beneficial to society.

You have the choice between being the self-taught man or the autodidact. You're surrounded by information, a constant stream of it. You could educate yourself from home and never set foot on a college campus. Given where we are right now, it's insanely important you choose the route of the autodidact. Each individual choice will determine whether we're in the age of the self-taught man or the autodidact. Let me explain.

The passive consumption of information

It's clear that an indiscriminate approach to learning didn't help Sartre's self-taught man. He consumes information without any other aim than the consumption of information. This leaves him morally bankrupt. Today, consuming information passively leaves you susceptible to fake news and a variety of myths.

Take, for instance, common [health myths](#) many of us believe. MSG isn't as bad for you as myth would have you think, but somewhere along the way you may have read information based on Dr. Ho Man Kwok's 1968 letter to the New England Journal of Medicine, in which he speculated on MSG's harmful side-effects. His speculation wasn't based on evidence. MSG is merely a concentrated form of sodium, like high fructose corn syrup is a concentrated form of sugar. In either case, too much sodium and too much sugar are bad for you, but the concentrated forms, in and of themselves, are not.

Like myths, fake news articles thrive on the passive consumption of information. The self-taught man could cycle through an entire alphabet's worth of fictional books, and due to his self-proclaimed faith in humanity, the authors could pass them off as non-fiction.

Anyone who doesn't educate themselves on the accuracy of what they read, any self-educator who doesn't look purposefully for truthful information on a subject relevant to their pursuit is susceptible to fake news. As [The Guardian](#) notes, fake news is an "insidious trend" becoming a "global problem". Donald Trump, who says it's not the media he's against, but fake news, has spread a kind of fake news himself when he cited a [non-existent terror attack in Sweden](#) as part of his justification for his unconstitutional travel ban. Kellyanne Conway, Trump's adviser, also cited a fake story when she reported a "Bowling Green massacre" in Kentucky that never happened. This fake story was part of her justification for Trump's travel ban as well.

The autodidact sorts through all the information, fake or real, in order to learn. Learning is active and highly relevant to the autodidact's life, to whatever it is the autodidact cares about. If it's the truth you care about most of all, then you learn how to discover the truth, how to figure out if something is a myth, or a flat-out lie, like fake news.

Pulitzer Prize-winning site [Politifact](#) found that 50% of Donald Trump's campaign statements, posed as the truth, were lies. 20% were "mostly false". We now have a man as president who conned the American people with false information. If this is the age of self-taught men, then Donald Trump is the king of them. But if this is the age of autodidacts, an age where we seek out the truth and educate ourselves on what matters, we'll do as Ohio University suggests, "engage with the right kind of material" and apply it to our lives effectively. The right kind of material is the truthful kind. Let's make this the age of autodidacts.

Featured image courtesy of [thierry erhman](#)

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