



## Research on the Reading of Adults

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THE FIELD OF reading has been studied in many different ways. All the investigations have something of interest to contribute to the librarian, whose major stock in trade is still books even in this audio-visual age. This report assumes, however, that the most pertinent studies are those which are concerned with the "sociology of reading" and which address themselves to the question: "Who reads what, and where does he get it, and how does it affect him?" On these there have been comparatively few efforts at research; we have much to learn about each of the aspects: the "who," the "what," the "where," and—most important—the "how does it affect him?"

The first scientific studies of reading, which began to appear in the middle of the nineteenth century, addressed themselves to a different set of problems. They were concerned with the reading act as a physiological process—the charting of eye movements, the noting of pauses, the study of blinking or lip movement or span of attention, as related to reading speed and comprehension. By the second decade of the present century the scientific findings of these psychological and physiological investigations were applied to the question of efficient pedagogical method—to the refinement of reading tests, to experimentation in teaching techniques, and to the exploration of reading readiness, speed, growth, and skill in relation to the physiological processes connected with the reading act. There was the beginning of interest also in the so-called "hygiene of reading," which experimented with the effects on reading skill and fatigue of different colors of paper and print, various sizes and kinds of types, and various methods of spacing and determining margins. It was not until 1930 that the students of reading began to explore its social role and its connection with the purposes it serves.

The earliest studies of the sociology of reading were concerned with  
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the general rather than the specific aspects of the problem. We were interested in gaining some basic knowledge about readers and reading in broad terms, in knowing something about the averages and the norms before turning our attention to the individual and his place in the total picture. Thus we saw the importance of describing the "who" in the basic question, but identification of the reader was stated in terms of the characteristics most readily ascertained objectively. We were able to reply in census-like terms to such questions as: How do readers differ from nonreaders? What are the characteristics of the persons who read? Who is more likely, in any community, to be the customer of the bookstore, the borrower from the library, the user of the several media of print? Sex, age, education, occupation, and marital status have been the variables most frequently studied<sup>1-5</sup>—variables which can be identified quickly in a personal interview or checked easily on a questionnaire.

Within the limits thus imposed, we now have a fairly accurate if generalized picture of the reader. We know that education is the most important influence on reading behavior no matter what the sex, age, or economic status of the reader; we know that the younger adults read more than the older ones; we know that the upper middle income groups read more than the lower income groups; and we know that women are more likely to read for recreation, and men are more likely to turn to reading for professional and vocational reasons. These facts have been gained from study of readers in many different contexts—we have investigated cross sections of the general population, whether they were readers or not; we have turned our attention specifically to known readers (users of the public library, for example); we have studied the users of the several different media, not only those of print; and we have concentrated on specific occupational or educational groups. No matter how the question has been approached, the same general findings have resulted, and we can state with some certainty that our general picture of the reader is a reliable one. Thus, to say that we probably do not need many more studies of this aspect of the problem is not to denigrate the fine work already done in this area; it is a recognition of the solidity of the contribution already made, which renders it possible for us to go on from there, building upon the groundwork already laid.

The "where" studies have taken a similarly generalized view. Studies of sources have been of two kinds: (1) examination of the "geography"

of distribution agencies on a national, regional, and community basis,<sup>6</sup> and (2) investigation of agencies by types—the bookstore, the public library, the newsstand—as general sources of reading materials.<sup>5, 7-8</sup> As from the studies of the reader, some basic general knowledge has been gained from these scrutinies of sources. We know, with reasonable assurance, that the public library and the bookstore are the two major suppliers of books for adults, and that the way of second importance in which adult readers get such materials is to borrow from the collections of their friends. Also, we know that the city reader is more likely to have access to the varied stock he wants than is the reader in the rural area, and that almost invariably the person who is well served by one of the agencies will be well served by the others. The studies of specific agencies have dealt mainly with gross figures of use, while those of the “geography” of distribution should be recognized as concerned with potential rather than actual reading, showing what the maximum utilization could be for each type of agency in each kind of community and region, but not whether actual use has been made.

The investigations of what is read have been a little more specific, but again the kind of data which can most readily be gathered tends to be general. The “what” studies have been concerned with the form of the material more than with its content; our most reliable figures can provide us with comparative data on the reading of books, magazines, and newspapers as kinds of media,<sup>9</sup> or, at best, with general breakdowns of the book materials into such broad categories as fiction and nonfiction,<sup>10-11</sup> or the broad Dewey decimal classifications.<sup>12-13</sup> Assumptions about quality are often made in such studies; fiction is considered less “worth while” than nonfiction, for example, or books more “important” than magazines, but it need hardly be pointed out that their validity is limited. To determine quality the investigator must get “inside” the book or article and make an intensive analysis of the content.

But even when the investigator does this, the objective research methods he employs usually keep him from a very deep analysis of content. The most prolific contributions in the content analysis field have been the studies of “readability,” of which the works of Rudolf Fleisch<sup>14-16</sup> are perhaps the best known. Such studies are not concerned with the quality of the ideas or information contained in a given piece of writing; they are directed toward an analysis of the ease with which it can be read, quite apart from the value to be gained from such

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reading. Few would deny the importance of gauging the level of difficulty represented by different kinds of materials; certainly the librarian is well aware of the problem of finding those which deal with adult subject matter in terms which the average adult can understand. But the social role of reading is not adequately defined without some analysis of the value of the reading done and some interest in the effects. And there is a growing suspicion among students that indiscriminate reliance upon readability formulas to guide the writer may well alter the social role of reading in undesirable ways.<sup>17</sup>

Thus far, in treating the generalized character of the reading studies, we have treated the investigations of the question—Who reads what, and where does he get it, and how does it affect him?—as though they dealt with each aspect separately and in a vacuum. In actuality, even the most coldly objective efforts have attempted to combine the characteristics in meaningful ways. Thus, readers have been identified not only as readers per se, but as borrowers from the library or users of the bookstore (who and where). They have further been examined in terms of materials: What are the characteristics of the borrowers of fiction from libraries as opposed to buyers of fiction from bookstores, or how do library users of fiction differ from library users of nonfiction (who + where + what)? Such a combination of factors leads to a concern with reading interests and motivations: What do different people want to read about, and why?

Again, the early studies of interests were made in general terms; Waples and Tyler<sup>18</sup> deliberately addressed themselves to group characteristics, and established a strong correlation between them and stated reading interests. They found that the more characteristics that two or more groups held in common (for example, age, sex, occupation, and education) the more likely they were to check similar reading interests on a list of possible magazine articles. But once this was established, a new question arose: Do people actually read what they say they are interested in reading? Waples<sup>19</sup> and Carnovsky<sup>20</sup> combined the analysis of the checklist of interests with a report on actual reading and found that subject interest in itself is not enough; that people read in line with their stated interests only when the material is readily accessible and easy to read. The old assumption, basic to most studies of reading interests and preferences, that what people read is a key to the subjects in which they are interested, seems pretty effectively disproved. Accessibility, then readability, and only then,

interest, are the factors which lead people to read the specific things they do.

The cumulated knowledge gained from the several types of studies described above leads naturally to an interest in the effects of reading. What difference does it make whether magazines are more widely read than books; whether women read more fiction than men; whether people read the accessible book instead of one in which they say they are interested? The difference it makes has importance only in terms of the values received from different kinds of reading and the influence, recognized or unknown, which a particular type of printed matter has upon those who see it.

Until recently none but the literary critics had the temerity to make value judgments about the content of written materials; and while their analyses have a long and respectable history in the field of literature, they lack the kind of so-called "scientific" objectivity which the social scientists have attempted to make the criterion of valid research. Thus the adventures of the critic's soul among masterpieces, revealing as the record of them may be, have not pretended to be the systematic, objective, and quantitative content analysis which social scientists demand. This does not invalidate either literary study or social science research; it merely underlines the difference between the objectives of the two kinds of investigation.

The extra-literary studies which attempt to control, as far as possible, the reliance on impressionistic and subjective judgments, have thus far been extremely limited in the field of motivation and effects. Motivations can hardly be studied without going to the reader himself, and the reader seldom knows why he reads a specific book at a particular time. The reasons he gives are often superficial or stereotyped; he is very seldom aware of the accessibility factor as a motivating force; and he often isolates a single influence when in reality his reading probably resulted from an opportune confluence of many influences.

He knows even less, of course, about results. Occasional mention is made in biographies and autobiographies of the life-changing factors in a book, but these are more interesting than convincing. Few of us can cite an instance in our own experience when a single reading caused a sudden and decisive turn of mind, and the question arises whether such an influence was ever actually felt in that way, or whether it merely makes a striking story. A superficial analysis of one's own reading behavior leads to the hypothesis that effects are cumulative;

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that no one occurrence but a lifetime of reading forms the opinions and attitudes that we possess; and that the dramatic moment of change and revelation comes because we have been building up to it through all the exposure to ideas in books and other media which have preceded the specific reading. The results are not denied, but the pinpointing of the moment at which an effect appeared is difficult.

Some outcomes of reading can be established. The effectiveness of reading done for an instrumental purpose, as when one follows recipes, instructions, and guides to specific behavior, can be demonstrated by putting the instruction into practice. A successful cake, or birdhouse, or homemade dress produced on the strength of recorded directions furnishes evidence that the maker read and understood. The comprehension of reading done for school assignment also can be measured by the assimilation of specific factual content. In other words, reading which leads to an overt act or to the memorizing of an objective piece of information is most susceptible of investigation.

The leading sociological studies in this area have centered in the effects of reading and other activities of communication upon political behavior<sup>21-22</sup> mainly because in the act of voting we have tangible evidence of attitude and interest which can be traced to written and spoken sources. From such research have come data pertinent to an understanding of both effects and motivations. We have learned that readers of political materials read in line with their predispositions, that they select the arguments which support established beliefs, and that they are most likely to remember and accept the points which occur most frequently. We are limited, however, in the extent to which we can transfer such findings concerning the deliberate reading of specifically "propagandistic" materials to the area of more subtle effects. *Remembrance of Things Past* is not campaign oratory, and its influence is not reflected in a specific act, like voting, which can be observed at a definite time and place. Nor does the reader of Proust, or Tolstoy, or Mann, or Hemingway consciously turn to such literature in order to change his mind or to reinforce particular opinions already held. Yet his mind may be changed without his becoming aware of it; and it is this kind of reading, which broadens one, makes him more capable of understanding, gives him wider horizons, or sharpens his awareness, toward which the present-day researchers would like to turn their attention.

As a consequence, the reading studies of the immediate future are

likely to turn more and more in the direction of the individual case study and the analysis of subjective factors. The general ones will continue to be useful for keeping background knowledge of the subject current, but the basic facts have now been established; and only when statistically significant deviations appear will it be necessary to multiply corroborative studies. Present interests lie, not so much in the modal reader as in the "sport"—the man with little education who reads widely, the well-educated nonreader, the opinion leader, or the influential member of the community who must be regarded as a special reader rather than a typical one. There is a growing interest, too, in more subtle uses of content analysis for what it can tell us about probable effects on different readers. In other words, we are ready to study the specific reader either in the very act of a particular reading, or through an analysis of all of his reading over a period of time, in order to follow through on the implications for his behavior, attitudes, and personality development.<sup>23</sup>

These are ambitious aims, and their attainment will not come easily. But their value—to educators, social scientists, and students of communication—is great. The librarian, who is a little bit of all three, should be particularly interested in the results. While he may feel intuitively that his social function is a vital one, he is often hard put to find objective data to support his belief. If he could learn something about the social role which reading plays, about the effects which different kinds of reading have upon different kinds of people, about the needs which books alone can satisfy, about the kind of people most affected by reading, he could perform more efficiently the important role in society which should be his but which now—too frequently—seems unattainable.

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