

Trends in leisure reading: Forty years of research on reading in the Netherlands

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Abstract

Recent international research describes a diminishing interest in leisure reading for almost all western countries. In this article, we have investigated trends in leisure reading of the Dutch population between 1955 and 1995, using data from seven national representative time budget surveys. First, our results show that the time spent on reading has diminished by about half. The strongest decline, especially for books, was found during the initial phase of television (1955–1975). More specifically, the long-term decline in reading can be attributed to a shrinking portion of the population that reads on a regular basis. Second, with regard to differences between social categories, we observed a steeper decline for men than for women. In 1995, as a consequence, women on average read more than men. Also, we found that reading is in retreat through cohort replacement. Among the post-war generations, each newly entering five-year cohort spent a lower percentage of leisure time on reading than its immediate predecessor. Third, four possible explanations for the observed downward trend in reading were examined. The combination of paid work and domestic tasks among the post-war generations, and the increasing diversity in leisure activities, explained part of the observed decline. Also, the expansion of the supply of reading material seemed to have harmed appreciation of printed media to a certain degree. Competition from television turned out to be the most evident cause of the decline in reading. In this respect, individuals socialized in a culture of reading and printed matter (born before 1950), exhibited the lowest degree of reading replacement with television. Among these older generations, the higher educated have held on longest to leisure reading. These observed differences in substitution imply that the remaining group of readers, currently consists primarily of higher educated persons from the pre-war cohorts.

1. Trends in leisure reading: Backgrounds and research questions

In the 1980s, public concern arose about the state of affairs with respect to leisure reading. According to popular American critics, interest in the printed media had

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declined as a consequence of the rising appeal of television (Postman, 1986; Hirsch, 1987). Ironically, their printed notion of increasing illiteracy received widespread attention and thus circulated widely. The prediction that interest in reading was declining, was however, not unfounded. Several studies from a number of western countries support this diagnosis. In the United States, the time spent on reading diminished from 3.7 hours in 1965 to 2.8 hours in 1985 (Cutler, 1990; Robinson, 1990). Earlier research by Robinson (1980) had demonstrated that the reading of newspapers declined sharply. The number of U.S. citizens reading a daily, was down from 85 percent in 1957 to 63 percent in 1977. Samuel (1996) observed a similar downward trend for France. Whereas in 1967, 60 percent of the French read a newspaper every day, in 1988 this proportion was only 41 percent. As for the Netherlands, Knulst (1991) noted a decline between 1975 and 1985, not only for newspaper reading, but for magazines and books as well. From recent research by Cushman et al. (1996), it can be concluded that the interest in printed media has diminished in practically all western countries.

The downfall in leisure reading was not foreseen, at least not in the Netherlands. On the contrary, predictions made by scientific research institutions a few decades ago, forecasted a rosy future for reading. In a notable study from the fifties on leisure behavior, the Central Bureau of Statistics made the following prediction: "Since it is to be expected that the number of youngsters enrolling in higher education will rise in the near future, it is likely that their reading will likewise increase. If the booming of pocket books is taken into account, it does not seem very bold to suppose a substantial increase in the reading frequency of the average Dutch person" (CBS, 1959: 41). Two decades later, the Scientific Council for Governmental Policy still assumed that the proportion of frequent readers would rise (WRR, 1977: 93). Again, a growth of the participation in higher educational levels was pointed out as the main factor that would lead to a growing number of readers among the Dutch population. In addition, the demand for reading matter would burgeon as the future public became eager for more detailed information on various hobbies and interests.

Of the predictions outlined here, the rise in educational attainment proved to be correct. In the Netherlands, the average number of years of schooling increased from 10.0 to 12.0 for men in the cohorts born between 1920 and 1960, and from 8.3 to 11.8 years for women in these cohorts (Ganzeboom, 1996). The prophesy of the expanding supply of reading matter was also met (CBS, 1995). In the last four decades, the Dutch public has been pampered with an abundant amount of reading matter. In addition to a growing number of published book titles (among which there is indeed a continuous plenitude of cheap pocket editions) and an ever expanding assortment of magazines on a wide range of topics, the reading audience has been offered an extensive network of public libraries. Yet, despite the fact that the conditions deemed essential at the time were amply met, the expected rise in leisure reading has not taken place. Rather, the opposite has occurred. The Dutch read considerably less in 1995 than they did in the 1950s (Knulst and Kraaykamp, 1996).

In this article, we report on a longitudinal research project, initiated by the Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Office (SCP), on reading behavior and the use of other media. Recently, a detailed report on this project appeared, entitled: 'Reading habits.

Half a century of research on reading and its rivals' (Knulst and Kraaykamp, 1996). This article offers a concise summary of some noteworthy results from this report as well as some additional results, as it considers the most recent data from 1995 as well. The study focussed primarily on the question of *why* the prognoses from 1959 and 1977 cited above did *not* come true. This central topic can be split up into three research questions. First, *Which trends in leisure reading have developed in the Netherlands since the 1950s?* Second, *Did the observed trends occur equally in all segments of the population?* And third, *How can the peculiarities in these shifts be explained?* In our research questions, we considered reading as an activity that people undertook at their own initiative. Consequently, reading was studied as leisure behavior. There are few indications that reading ensuing from educational or occupational obligations is under pressure. Thus, these types of reading were not studied here.

The state of affairs with respect to reading has received the special attention of researchers for quite some time. Two main reasons can be mentioned. First, it is argued by several philosophical scholars that through reading, one gains access to the accomplishments of western civilization (Hirsch, 1987; Bloom, 1988). This information on scientific, political and social issues is considered indispensable for the adequate functioning of a democratic political system. These authors, and many with them, view books as bearers of culture, which is why governmental policy is implemented in various countries to promote reading. In the Netherlands, this promotion occurs on quite a large scale. On the one hand, the government creates favorable conditions for press and book production diversity (facilities for publishers of newspapers and opinion magazines, protection through fixed book prices, grants, and book loan rights for writers), while on the other hand, reading itself is actively encouraged. In this respect, education in literary reading at school reaches all students and governmentally financed public libraries offer abundant opportunities for borrowing books in even the smallest town.

Secondly, it can be argued that reading is indispensable for acquiring cognitive competence and skill. People who turn their back on reading harm their own interests. "The more we read the more knowledge we gain", as Hirsch (1987: 28) argues. Indeed, in the educational system, reading still plays a pivotal role in the transmission of knowledge and the development of cognitive competence (Wagner, 1980; Stedman and Kaestle, 1987). Moreover, literacy and reading proficiency seem to be necessary skills for achieving high occupational or income levels, as studies by Hauser and Huang (1997) and Hanson and Farell (1995) demonstrate.

2. Data and research design

In order to assess the interest in reading, scholars typically use survey estimates of reading frequencies (how often do you read?), or the time spent doing it (how much time do you generally spend reading?). A disadvantage to this method is that it usually results in an overestimation of the actual reading behavior (Knulst and Kraaykamp, 1996: 145). A more valid assessment is the detailed registration of peo-

ple's time budgets (van der Voort, 1991; Robinson and Godbey, 1997). The data in this article were obtained in this manner. The time budget method implies that people record all their activities in a diary, every quarter of an hour for an entire week. The advantage to this method compared to the previously-mentioned estimates is that people cannot register more activities than are allowed by the time available. In time budget research, as is true of other types of media use, reading is incorporated in a more broad-ranging study regarding the use of time in everyday life. As such, reading becomes one of the many activities that may occur during the day. A specified account is kept of these other activities (e.g., work, transportation, sleep), as well. The chance of overestimating prestigious activities (such as reading) is thereby limited, as is the chance of underestimating activities deemed trivial. A disadvantage to this time budget method is, however, that it is demanding and seriously impinges on respondents' time.

In the Netherlands, time budget research has a certain tradition. The first study that included time budget information on reading habits, was carried out in 1934–1935. However, this research only gathered information on employees and servants, so it cannot be easily compared to more recent data material. Following World War II, the Central Bureau of Statistics returned to the use of this method (CBS, 1959). This resulted in nationally representative data on leisure behavior for 1955–1956, even though the registration of activities was limited to free evenings of work days (from 5.30 p.m. until midnight) and the weekend (Saturdays from noon to midnight and Sundays from 8.00 a.m. until midnight). This time budget research was repeated in 1962–1963, so measurements are available for the period shortly before and during the adoption of television into Dutch society.

After these two measurement waves, the Central Bureau of Statistics did not replicate this specific type of time budget research and it was not until 1975 that a new study was initiated. At that time, a number of associated research agencies conducted a contemporary representative time budget investigation (TBO). Since then, this time budget study has been repeated every five years (in the month of October). Like the CBS research, this series of studies has been carried out among those aged twelve and older, but unlike the CBS research, the new series of time budget studies covers seven full days of a week (672 quarters of an hour between early Sunday morning and midnight Saturday). As one of the initiators the Social and Cultural Planning Office has reported on these time budget studies extensively. Our article is based on the 1975–1995 series of time budget studies as processed by the SCP, plus the 1955 and 1962 CBS studies. Taken together, these national time budget data provide a reliable source for the description of forty years of developments in reading.

3. Four decades of leisure reading (1955–1995)

As an introduction, the development of reading behavior since the 1950s is described (first research question). Shifts in the time spent watching television are included in this discussion, because television viewing is considered to be a direct competitor of reading (McLuhan, 1964; Roberts et al., 1984; van der Voort, 1991).

Table 1 offers an overview of hours spent on reading and watching television from 1955 onwards. The data gathered in 1975 and later cover the entire week, whereas data from the earlier CBS studies were based on the 60.5 hours segment described above (see note below Table 1). By restricting the more recent data to reading and television viewing during the same limited segment, all measurements displayed can be compared in absolute terms (see the two right-hand columns in Table 1).

Table 1
Time spent on reading and watching television, between 1955 and 1995, in hours per week (as primary and secondary activity)

	Hours during a full week (168 hour)						Hours during workday evenings and weekends (60.5 hours)*	
	Reading			Television watching			Reading	Watching
	As primary activity	As secondary activity	Total	As primary activity	As secondary activity	Total	As primary activity	As primary activity
1955							5.0	0.2
1962							4.0**	5.4**
1975	6.1			10.2	3.1	13.3	3.6	10.1
1980	5.5			10.3	3.1	13.4	3.3	10.1
1985	5.3			12.1	3.6	15.8	3.1	11.3
1990	5.1	1.2	6.2	12.0	3.5	15.5	3.0	11.0
1995	4.6	1.4	6.0	12.4	4.6	17.0	2.8	10.9

* Five workday evenings from 17.30 to 24.00, Saturdays from 12.00 to 24.00 and Sundays from 8.00 to 24.00.

** Partially estimated. In 1962, different from 1955, Saturday mornings from 8.00 to 12.00 were also surveyed and thus an extra of four hours of leisure time was available. Consequently, total leisure time increased from 24.0 hours on average in 1955 to 28.8 hours in 1962. To achieve comparability the results for 1962 are weighted by $24.0/28.8 (= 0.83)$.

Source: CBS-1955 (Dutch population aged 12 year and over ($N = 7.230$))

CBS-1965 (Dutch population aged 12 year and over ($N = 4.008$))

SCP TBO-1975–1995 (Dutch population aged 12 year and over: 1975 ($N = 1.309$), 1980 ($N = 2.730$), 1985 ($N = 3.262$), 1990 ($N = 3.158$), 1995 ($N = 3.227$)).

Table 1 shows that on the eve of the television era in 1955, the Dutch spent about five hours reading (about 21 percent of an average of 24 hours of free time). Those five hours are about twice the reading time observed in 1995. Those assuming that the popularity of reading in those days is related to the quality of the reading material available, should realize that virtually all types of entertainment attracted more public attention then they do currently. Cinemas, theaters, and dance halls had larger audiences during the 1950s than they do nowadays, while radio was at the peak of its popularity as well. Rather than high quality, it seems to be the limited range of choices that explains the higher degree of popularity of these activities.

This period of relative scarcity of amusement and diversion had ceased by the end of the 1950s, when not only television, but also hi-fi equipment and the private auto-

mobile entered the scene. Between 1955 and 1962, the time spent in front of a television set increased from 0.2 to 5.4 hours a week. The time spent reading diminished steadily, though it appears that the sharpest decline took place in the 1960s. While reading still occupied an average of 21 percent of people's leisure time in 1955, seven years later, in 1962, this was 17 percent, and in 1975 it had been reduced to only 13 percent. Since that time, the proportion of leisure reading has diminished further (to 9 percent in 1995), but this decline is not as dramatic as that directly following the introduction of television. The advance of television was also most impressive during the initial stage of its introduction: from 0.2 hours in 1955 to 10.1 hours in 1975. In the following twenty years (1975–1995), the increase in time spent watching television was relatively modest at 0.8 hours (within the CBS 60.5 hour segment).

Table 1 also offers entire week data for this second twenty year period (1975–1995). Moreover, extra aspects have been measured. Starting in 1975, for instance, the amount of time was measured that audiences watched television with their full attention (no secondary activities), as well as the amount of time people combined television viewing with other activities (such as taking care of children or talking to house mates). This distinction with respect to degree of attention was also initiated for reading in 1990 (for example, reading may be combined with eating breakfast or listening to music). On the basis of this entire-week information, it can be concluded that between 1975 and 1995, the time spent reading (as primary activity) declined from 6.1 hours to 4.6 hours. During the same period, the time spent watching television (as primary activity) increased more substantially, from 10.2 hours in 1975 to 12.4 hours in 1995. A decline in reading seems to go hand in hand with this trend, even if the largest shifts were not found in the second twenty year period, but in the first. In addition, it is remarkable that both the time spent watching television and reading, when combined with other activities had increased. As a result, people read more while doing other activities in 1995 than they did in 1990, but this upward shift of 0.2 hours did not compensate for the decline of 0.5 hours in reading as a primary activity. If the two modalities of television viewing are added, then the advance of the television during the second twenty year period turns out to be considerable after all (3.6 hours). In the remainder of our article, reading combined with other activities will not be the object of study. Whenever reading is mentioned, we are referring to reading as a primary activity.

Above, we addressed developments in total reading which might be too much of a simplification. Therefore, Fig. 1 shows how time is divided between types of reading material. For the sake of the comparison with 1955, we again differentiated between information from the CBS limited surveys (left-hand panel) and information from the full week surveys (right-hand panel). The left-hand section of Fig. 1 shows that in particular the reading of books and newspapers declined between 1955 and 1995. Within the CBS segment of 60.5 hours, the time spent on books diminished from 2.4 hours in 1955 to 0.9 hours in 1995. Here, the sharpest decline occurred in the period ending in 1975. With regard to newspaper reading, a more gradual, albeit uninterrupted, decline is observed. Until 1975, surprisingly, the time spent reading magazines increased. We will not comment on this development here, but this devi-

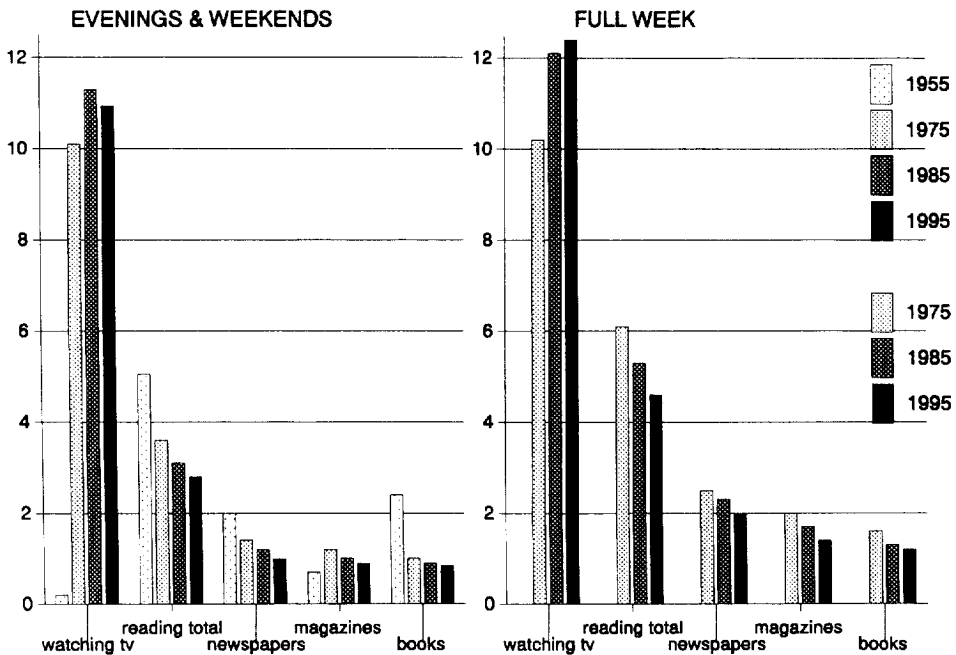


Fig. 1. Time spent on reading (books, newspapers and magazines) and television in hours per week, between 1955 and 1995, population aged 12 years and over. The left-hand panel considers hours spent during workday evenings and weekends (CBS limited survey), whereas the right-hand panel considers hours spent during a full week (7 days). Source: CBS-1955 ($N=7.230$); SCP TBO-1975 ($N=1.309$), TBO-1985 ($N=3.262$), TBO-1995 ($N=3.227$).

ation of the trend is related to the introduction of a number of novelties on the Dutch magazine market (integral color printing, the rise of the gossip press). Yet these innovations could not establish a lasting upsurge, as the decrease of interest in magazines between 1975 and 1995 depicts.

The CBS limited survey, which is our benchmark in the comparisons with the 1950s and 1960s, can only tell us how much people read within the 60.5 hours marked as non-working time. If it is supposed that in the 1950s reading only took place after 'the work had been done', it might be that the moments at which people read have changed since then and that people read less during the evenings and weekends and more during the day on weekdays (and thus outside of the CBS segment measurements). Although we do not have information on daytime leisure reading during weekdays for the period 1955–1975, we do have such data for the 1975–1995 period (right-hand section of Fig. 1). Inspection of Fig. 1 illustrates that such a shift only occurred with regard to newspaper reading. In 1975, 44 percent of the time spent on dailies fell outside the selected CBS segment, while this proportion was 50 percent in 1995. A plausible reason is that during this period a number of newspapers converted from evening papers to morning papers. The results repre-

senting the total amount of reading time do not display this shift. In 1975, 44 percent of all the reading occurred outside of the CBS segment, in 1995 this share still was at 40 percent. Between 1975 and 1995, the decline in reading can be observed both within and outside of the CBS 60.5 hour segment to be of a similar magnitude.

The results described above are an arithmetic product of the percentage of the sample that has actually read and the time spent reading by this group of 'participants'. A more detailed analysis, not reported here (Knulst and Kraaykamp, 1996), shows that the decline between 1975 and 1995 can be attributed largely to the diminishing number of 'participants' within the stretch of the one week. In 1995, newspapers and magazines reached about two-thirds of the Dutch population every week (counting all participants that spent at least one quarter of an hour reading) whereas, in 1975, this weekly range still stood at 80 percent. Also, the portion of the Dutch public that has read any books during one week has diminished from 49 percent in 1975 to 38 percent in 1995. Those who did read newspapers and books in 1995, however, spent more time reading than people from the larger population of readers did two decades ago. This demonstrates that it is in particular those readers of newspapers and books who spent relatively little time reading who have pulled out. In the case of magazines, both aspects are in decline. The number of magazine readers as well as the time spent on magazines by those remaining readers diminished.

4. Trends in leisure reading for distinct social categories

Above, our findings indicate a downward trend in reading among the population as a whole. Next, we will consider to what extent these average scores adequately depict what is going on among different social categories (second research question). The observed trends could be the result of substantial shifts in one group, while another group might witness only minor changes. In order to establish this, we will examine men and women on the one hand, and age- and cohort groups on the other.

As a first step, considering differences in leisure reading between men and women seems relevant (Greany, 1980; Radway, 1984). In the 1950s, the CBS study on leisure behavior already pointed out substantial differences between the reading of men and women (CBS, 1959). In those days, the 6.2 hours average reading time per week for men was considerably longer than the 4.2 hours for women. In our analysis, the time spent reading was calculated for men and women separately for the 1955–1995 period, and these results per sex were further divided into different age groups (Fig. 2). The time spent reading books, newspapers and magazines is expressed as a proportion of one's leisure time.

Fig. 2 displays a diminishing percentage of leisure reading for both men and women in all age groups. In addition, the figure shows that, for nearly all age groups, reading decreased most sharply between 1955 and 1975. From 1975 to 1995, most categories showed a less marked decline. If we pay specific attention to the differences between men and women, we discern a diminishing from 29 to 13 percent leisure reading among men aged 60 and over. Among young men, 20 and under, the decline was much sharper, from 22 percent in 1955 to only 3 percent in 1995.

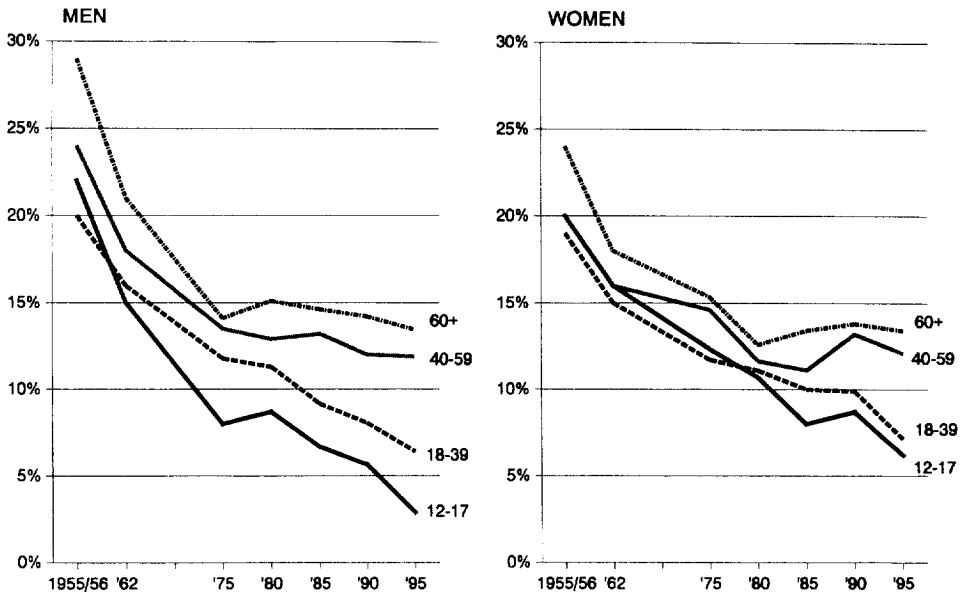


Fig. 2. Time spent on reading as a proportion of total leisure time, between 1955 and 1995, by sex and age, population aged 12 years and over. The results for CBS-1955 en CBS-1962 deal with a proportion of total leisure time during workday evenings and weekends (CBS limited survey), while the results for the period 1975–1995 deal with a proportion of total leisure time during a full week (7 days). Source: CBS-1955 ($N=7.230$) CBS-1962 ($N=4.008$); SCP TBO-1975 ($N=1.309$), TBO-1980 ($N=2.370$), TBO-1985 ($N=3.262$), TBO-1990 ($N=3.158$), TBO-1995 ($N=3.227$).

Among women, the general change has been less striking. In 1955, women aged 60 and over spent about 24 percent of their leisure time reading, while in 1995 this had diminished to 13 percent, which is similar to the proportion of time spent reading by men of comparable age. Among young women (aged 20 and under) the decline, from 20 to 7 percent, is again large yet is smaller than it was for young men. As a result of this more modest decline, categories of women which initially read less than their male counterparts currently seem to read relatively more. These results are in line with research carried out by McKenna et al. (1995) who resolved for the United States that women take a more positive attitude towards leisure reading than men.

Our analysis reveals that older people read more than younger people, even if all age groups have spent a smaller proportion of their free time on reading in the past decades. Here we come across two opposite tendencies. On the one hand, the time spent reading seems to increase as people get older (Robinson, 1980; Smith, 1995). If this age effect were the only apparent relevant factor, then the average reading time should increase in the Netherlands as a result of the aging population. This is clearly not the case, because a second factor, namely a cohort effect, plays a role as well. It can be assumed that the significance of reading as a part of people's upbringing has diminished for each subsequent generation. This being the case, leisure

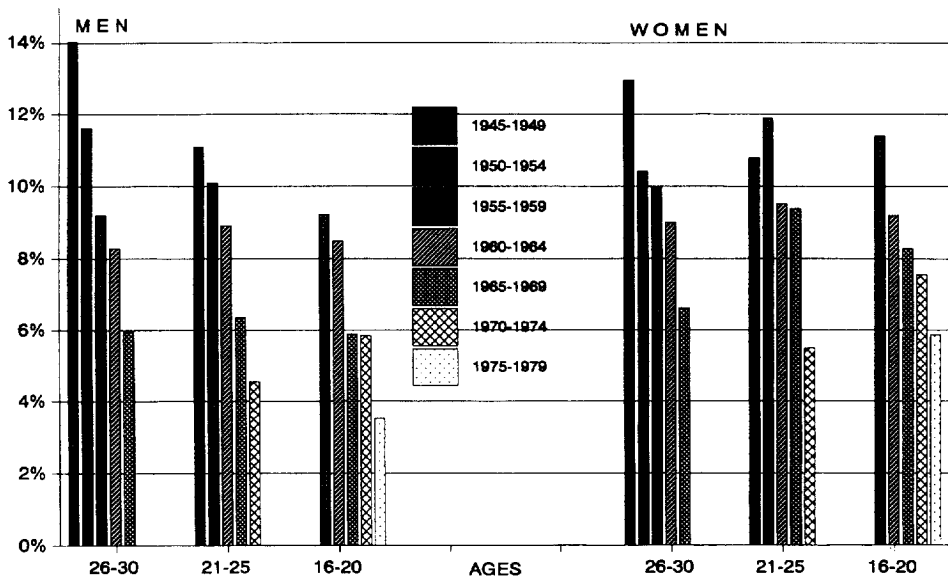


Fig. 3. Time spent on reading as a proportion of total leisure time, for the age groups between 16 and 30 years, by sex and birth cohort (1975–1995). Source: SCP TBO-1975 ($N=1.309$), TBO-1980 ($N=2.370$), TBO-1985 ($N=3.262$), TBO-1990 ($N=3.158$), TBO-1995 ($N=3.227$).

behavior including only a scanty reading menu would develop from the bottom up (through cohort replacement).

Fig. 3 simultaneously shows the effects of cohort and age described above. It allows us to examine how much time the different cohorts spent on reading as they moved through the life cycle. Again, reading time is expressed as a proportion of the total amount of leisure time. Fig. 3 depicts quite strong cohort effects for the group aged 16 to 30. Between the ages of 26 and 30, each earlier cohort read more than its successors. Men born between 1945 and 1949, on average, spent 14 percent of their leisure time reading, men born between 1965 and 1969 only 6 percent. Yet, there are also age effects. The oldest cohorts read more between 26 and 30 than at the ages of 21 to 25. However, this age effect seems to fade away in the younger cohorts. Similar results can be discerned for women, be it that the female cohorts of most age groups read more than the male cohorts.

Above, it is illustrated that the impact of age for leisure time reading is diminishing over the cohorts. Fig. 4 examines this development in greater detail. In this analysis, we considered three measurement years, cohorts clustered into groups spanning 10 years, and reading time expressed in hours per week. This arrangement demonstrates that, in the case of the recent cohorts it can no longer be argued that reading increases as people grow older. The turning point for this phenomenon lies in the 1940–1949 cohort. Age effects did occur among the generations born between 1920 and 1940. For example, individuals born between 1930 and 1939, who were aged between 35 and 45 in 1975 and at that time read on average 5.5 hours, scored

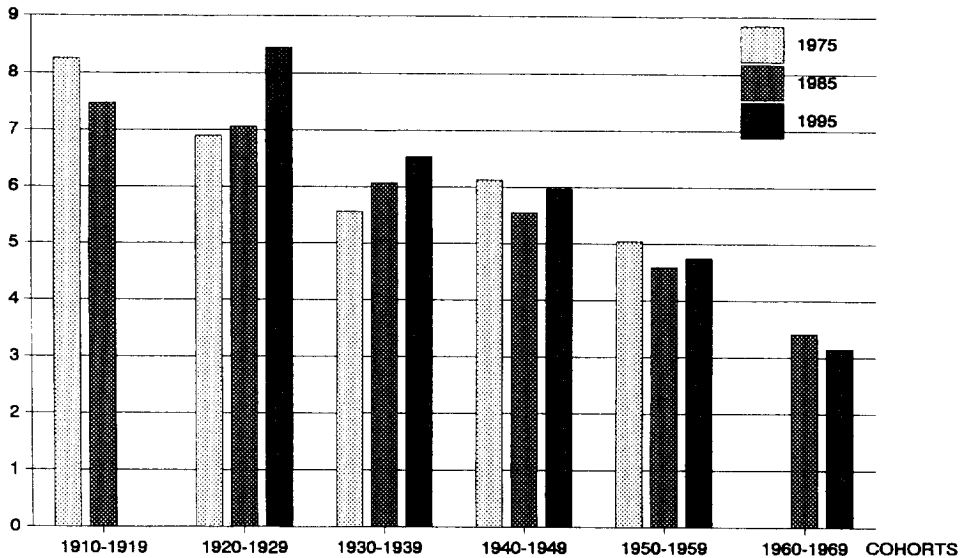


Fig. 4. Time spent on reading in hours per week, by birth cohort, population aged 16 to 75 (1975–1995). All results controlled for differences due to education, number of working hours and sex. Source: SCP TBO-1975 ($N=1.309$), TBO-1985 ($N=3.262$), TBO-1995 ($N=3.227$).

6.5 hours in the last survey (in 1995), when they were between 55 and 65 years old. Accordingly, this cohort, as well as the cohort born between 1920 and 1929, belongs to a category of the population that, in deviation from the general downward trend, has increased its reading. Cohorts born after 1940 all started off at a lower level which did not increase as they grew older.

The observed general decline in leisure reading thus more specifically mirrors the pattern that is present among the post-war cohorts, especially those born after 1950. These differences in reading habits between cohorts, as presented in Fig. 4, cannot be attributed to disturbing effects, such as differences in available leisure time or differences in the composition of our sample with regard to gender or level of education, because these influences have been taken into account.

5. An examination of four explanations for the decline in reading

How can it be explained that reading has declined most strongly among the post-war cohorts (third research question)? This is all the more striking because these happen to be the cohorts with the best educational opportunities and ample access to a developed infrastructure for readers. These favorable circumstances have not yielded the positive effects on reading which were expected. Which other factors have been at work? What has been overlooked in the earlier prognoses? Below, we consider four possible explanations. The tenability of our fourth explanation, a

steadily rising appeal of television, is ascertained by an additional analysis in the sixth section.

5.1. An increasing lack of time in daily life

Reading takes time. Not only do people need sufficient leisure time for reading (Robinson, 1980), they must also have the opportunity to concentrate on reading for a considerable period of time (Knulst, 1991). Both conditions were probably met more easily during the 1950s than nowadays, especially for men. Around 1955, men and women each had their own separate tasks. Responsibilities for housekeeping and child rearing were women's domain, paid work and house maintenance were male's responsibilities. The domestic chores of women were scattered throughout the day, which implied that these obligations were alternated with bits of leisure time. In this construct, men had a much clearer division between work and leisure. Outside of their working hours, that is, in the evenings and on Sundays, they were usually free. This continuity, which characterized men's leisure time, would appear to be a favorable condition for activities that require concentration, such as reading.

In the decades that followed, this role pattern gradually broke down. Married women increasingly participated in the labor force and men engaged more frequently in domestic chores and child care (SCP, 1996). Both developments have had drastic consequences on the time budgets of men and women aged between 25 and 45, because during that phase of life the greatest bustle in their occupational careers coincides with the 'rush hour' period in the family cycle. In this exacting phase of life, dual responsibilities have become quite common, although it must be noted that women still take care of the lion's share of domestic chores and men still do most of the paid work. The post-war cohorts, and in particular those men and women with intermediate or higher levels of education, first came across this burdensome situation at the ages of 25–45. This resulted in this group having four hours less leisure time than earlier generations, when men and women each had only one kind of obligation. In addition, men currently also see their leisure time becoming more fragmented by domestic chores.

As a consequence of the phenomenon of combined chores, we might expect a downward trend in reading since the 1950s. Additional analyses show that the increasing number of responsibilities were particularly unfavorable for men (Knulst and Kraaykamp, 1996). Yet, among women aged 25–45 (with intermediate or higher schooling levels), for whom the combination of chores has increased as well, no negative effect on their reading time can be discerned. Apparently, women are better at adjusting their reading habits to a time schedule that includes fragmented tasks. The observed effect among men, however, only touches part of the total decline in reading.

5.2. An increasing number of leisure alternatives

The growing competition between leisure alternatives might be a second explanation for the decline in reading (Knulst, 1991). Supported by substantial increases in

wealth and spatial mobility since the 1950s, the average Dutch person was able to engage in a growing number of leisure activities. Also, new opportunities for entertainment emerged both in and outside of the home. According to the predictions made by the Scientific Council for Governmental Policy (WRR, 1977) which were mentioned earlier, the broadening of personal interests would benefit reading as there would be an increasing number of topics to read about. Plausible as this argument seemed, it overlooked the scarcity in leisure time. The more activities people engage in, the less time they have left for activities they previously pursued, such as reading.

Additional analyses indeed show that, since 1975, the time spent on reading has declined more precipitously for those with a broad leisure repertoire than for those with a narrow range of leisure activities (Knulst and Kraaykamp, 1996). Hobbies, nightlife activities and sports emerged as serious rivals of reading. But, again, this effect only explains a part of the total observed decline in reading, because it is only observed among those with lower levels of education. This group is limited in size and, atypical in that a broad leisure repertoire occurs mostly among those with intermediate and higher levels of education rather than among the lower educated.

5.3. An increasing supply of reading matter

A third explanation for the decline in leisure reading might be that the attraction of reading is hampered by the excessive production of reading matter. As we emphasized in our introduction, a broad supply of printed matter and reading material accessible to all Dutch inhabitants is reckoned among the merit goods according to current cultural policy. The more information available and the greater the opportunity for reading, the better this will be for the public interest, as is also reasoned by those who previously formulated the expectations on a possible increase in reading. These expectations were grounded on the misconception that collectively appreciated cultural goods are not bound to economic laws and that the desire for information remains, regardless of the amount supplied. This goes against Gossen's first law of economics, which states that the added value of consumption goods decreases if the opportunity for consumption (supply) is increased, until the demand for a good is saturated. In contrast with this economic law, causes for the decline in leisure reading are usually not sought on the supply side, but are typically expected to involve a lack of opportunities for consumption. The issue of decline in leisure reading is, therefore, often answered in cultural politics by the provision of extra supply and facilities. A situation of 'information-overload' can, thus, emerge.

Several statistics depict a marked expansion of the supply in reading material. Between 1955 and 1993, the number of books loaned in public libraries increased by a factor of 12 (CBS, 1995). The inclination to increasingly expand the supply is shared by both the public sector and the market sector. Since 1955, the production of various book titles increased by 217 percent. At the same time, the actual use made of this supply during these four decades continually decreased. To what extent the declining demand can be attributed to the simultaneously expanding supply cannot be assessed with the available data. However, the occurrence of such a presumed

discouragement effect seems evident with regard to certain printed media. In the magazine sector, with a growth rate of new titles of 60 percent between 1975 and 1990, the purchase per household has declined by 6 percent (Knulst and Kraaykamp, 1996), and the time spent on magazines has also diminished by an above average rate. In this case, the reported growth of the supply refers to magazines distributed upon payment only, so it does not include the sharp increase in magazines distributed for free. It seems almost inevitable that the appreciation of periodically distributed reading matter, which was already put to the test by the disproportionate increase in the regular supply of magazines, will be further corroded by this additional spread of free magazines.

5.4. An increasing rivalry with television

Television is mentioned by the vast majority of scholars as the cause of waning reading habits. Although television viewing can be assumed to be relevant in explaining the decline in reading, we did not want to immediately target for this obvious cause. We started, therefore, with an attempt to study which other factors, often overlooked, were significant. For the three previously described explanations, a negative impact on reading could be demonstrated or at least made plausible. Yet the two hypotheses that could be tested empirically were not persuasive enough to fully explain the downward trend in reading. In the following, therefore, an investigation is discussed into the extent to which the rising appeal of television is responsible for this decline.

Popular American critics (Postman, 1986; Bloom, 1987; Hirsch, 1987) attribute the decline in reading mainly to the attraction of television. The formula of entertainment on which most television programs are based, would appear to have become the normative standard for all leisure activities. Accordingly, the general public was no longer familiar with reading material that required serious concentration, purely because the audience missed the amusing and concise formula in more elaborate textual messages. Roberts et al. (1984) and Koolstra et al. (1997) indeed demonstrated that watching a lot of television was detrimental to the capacity to read and also had a negative impact on people's attitudes toward reading. Compared to watching television, other types of information processing are evaluated as being too difficult or strenuous (Stedman and Kaestle, 1987; Beentjes and van der Voort, 1989). Hence, these authors left no doubt as to the negative impact of television on leisure reading in modern society.

Without positing an a priori judgement, the matter-of-fact import of this proposition seems reasonable. In selecting information or entertainment, the audience simply has to rely less on the printed media than during the 1950s. Increasingly, information and amusement, initially only available in print, are nowadays provided through the screen. The internet and cd-rom, for instance, relatively recent developments, can now also be used as substitutes for information guides and reference books, whereas romantic fiction can easily be exchanged for soap series and films on television. In the next section, this argument is developed into a substitution hypothesis and tested using our empirical data material.

6. Selective substitution of leisure reading by television

The initial phase of the adoption of television in the Netherlands in the 1955–1975 period seems to have had a profound effect on leisure reading. In the following decades (1975–1995), reading appears to have lost additional ground, when broadcasting time was expanded step-by-step, the number of public channels increased, and Dutch-spoken commercial stations were introduced (Knulst and Kalmijn, 1988; Knulst and Kraaykamp, 1996). If it is, thus, established that watching television gradually takes over the initial functions of reading, the question remains if and why this substitution is occurring in all social categories.

To answer this question, it must be assumed that, initially, television as a substitute does not offer everybody a pleasing alternative. It all depends on how much gratification a person derives from the original good (in this case reading) and how much a person could get in return by substituting (television for reading). To elaborate on this issue, we have to answer the question of why reading is more important for one person than for the other. Based on the information processing theory (Ganzeboom, 1982; Kraaykamp, 1993) and the assimilation theory (Frijda, 1988), it can be stated that people develop competence and routine as readers through learning processes and repeated utilization. Still, not everybody acquires those qualities to a similar degree. The more such abilities people can draw on, the more pleasure a person will experience while reading and, subsequently, the more such positive experiences a person acquires, the more likely it will be that that individuals will adhere to reading. Accordingly, competent readers who acquire rich reading experiences, will be least inclined to put aside leisure reading in favor of audio-visual alternatives (Knulst, 1991).

The growing attraction of television in society can be observed as a diffusion process in which a progressively growing mass accepts television as a full-fledged alternative for reading. In the process of innovation acceptance, one can distinguish an advance and a rearguard (Rogers, 1983). It is supposed that the group of competent, experienced readers will be the last to accept television as a satisfactory supplier of information and diversion. The question then arises, who are the competent and experienced readers in this rearguard? On arguable grounds (Hanson and Farrell, 1995; Smith, 1995), we consider an individual's level of education to be a suitable indicator of reading competence. Thus, it is expected that individuals with high levels of education, being competent readers, will opt for reading more often than those with lower levels of schooling.

McLuhan (1964) argued that every medium creates its own world of cognitive images, implying that the degree of adaptation to that environment depends on which medium was dominant during the period of one's upbringing. As a consequence, those socialized with reading and the printed media have become familiar with representations and conventions of a written culture and will, partially due to the scarcity of alternatives at that time, have acquired a good deal of routine in entertaining themselves by reading. Hence, these people can also be reckoned among the rearguard that will not have surrendered to the appeal of television without resistance. The younger generations, who grew up with television, on the other hand,

have never been that dependent on printed media. In general, they will have acquired less of a reading routine than those socialized before the era of television. Around 1965, television had penetrated about half of all Dutch living rooms. Since our data do not offer direct information on the availability of television sets during the period respondents were brought up, it is assumed that individuals who were aged 15 and over in 1965 were socialized in a culture of reading. Accordingly, the year 1950 is used as a boundary between generations. It is expected that cohorts born before 1950 will have substituted reading with television less frequently than cohorts born after 1950.

Therefore, in order to explain differences in the substitution of reading with television, both a competence hypothesis was used, with level of education as the determinant for degree of adaptation, as well as a socialization hypothesis, with birth cohort as determinant. Both expectations have been tested in Fig. 5. The developments observed in time spent reading and watching television between 1975 and 1995 were plotted against education and birth period. We distinguished three educational categories, which in turn were split into birth cohorts. In order to partial out the impact of differences in time restrictions (a large amount of leisure time offers

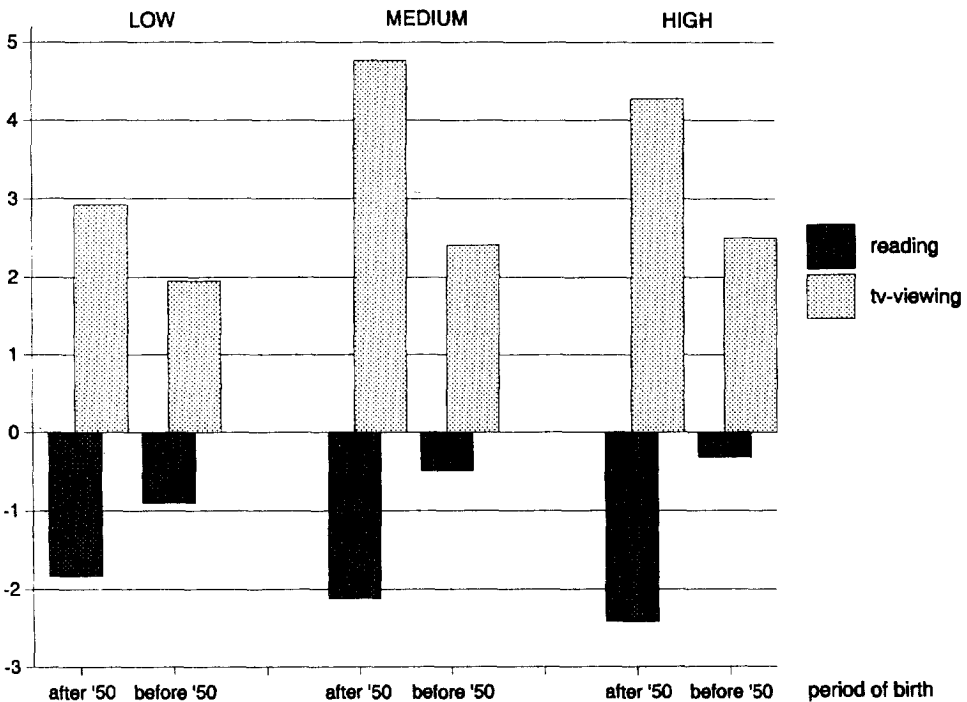


Fig. 5. Shifts in the number of hours spent on reading and television per week, between 1975 and 1995, by education and period of birth. All results controlled for a change in the average number of leisure hours between 1975 and 1995 (i.e., standardized to 47 hours leisure time per week). Source: SCP TBO-1975 ($N=1.309$), TBO-1995 ($N=3.227$).

more opportunity for reading and watching television), changes in time spent reading and television were indexed to an average amount of leisure time of 47 hours per week.

Fig. 5 clearly illustrates that all groups increased their television viewing and decreased their time spent on reading. Furthermore, our results point out that the socialization period has the strongest impact on changes in reading. Irrespective of their education, individuals born after 1950 decreased their reading time more than individuals born before 1950. What stands out is that the decline of 2.4 hours in reading among the cohorts born after 1950 with professional college or university, was stronger than the decline among both cohorts of lower educated (1.9 and 0.9 hours, respectively). Those assuming that level of education is the main determinant of the devotion to reading are only right with respect to the cohorts born before 1950. In this group, the higher educated indeed reduced their reading time to a lesser degree than the lower educated.

Our analysis offers the most support for the socialization hypothesis. Yet, it cannot be denied that on the whole the higher educated spent more time reading than the lower educated. Every survey has come up with this result, and the authors of the predictions mentioned earlier supposed that this meant that reading would increase if more people achieved high levels of education. Why has this prophesy not come true? A possible answer to this question can be found in Fig. 6.

Fig. 6 shows reading figures for 1975 and 1995, including the proportional changes (right-hand panel) for four birth cohorts. Again, three levels of education were distinguished for each cohort. Within each of the four cohorts, the higher educated read more than those with lower schooling levels. Also, within each cohort the average reading time was less than in the preceding cohorts. As a consequence, the differences between readers with similar levels of education, but from different generations, have become conspicuously large. In 1995, for example, the higher educated (professional college or university) from the cohort born after 1960 already read less than the lower educated from the cohorts born between 1920–1934 and those born between 1935–1949. The right-hand part of Fig. 6 shows that, among the cohorts 1920–1949, nearly all educational categories increased their reading time between 1975 and 1995 (in accordance with the operating age effect). However, this effect is strongest among those with the highest levels of education. Among cohorts born after 1949, all educational categories had reduced their time spent on reading. Here, the degree of decline was barely affected by individuals' level of education.

7. Conclusion and discussion

In this article, we discussed an investigation into the developments in leisure reading of the Dutch population between 1955 and 1995. The first question addressed in this respect concerned long-term shifts. The data, covering a forty year period, showed that the time spent on printed media had diminished by about half. The strongest decline, especially for books, was found during the initial phase of television (1955–1975). In the following twenty-year period, between 1975 and 1995, the

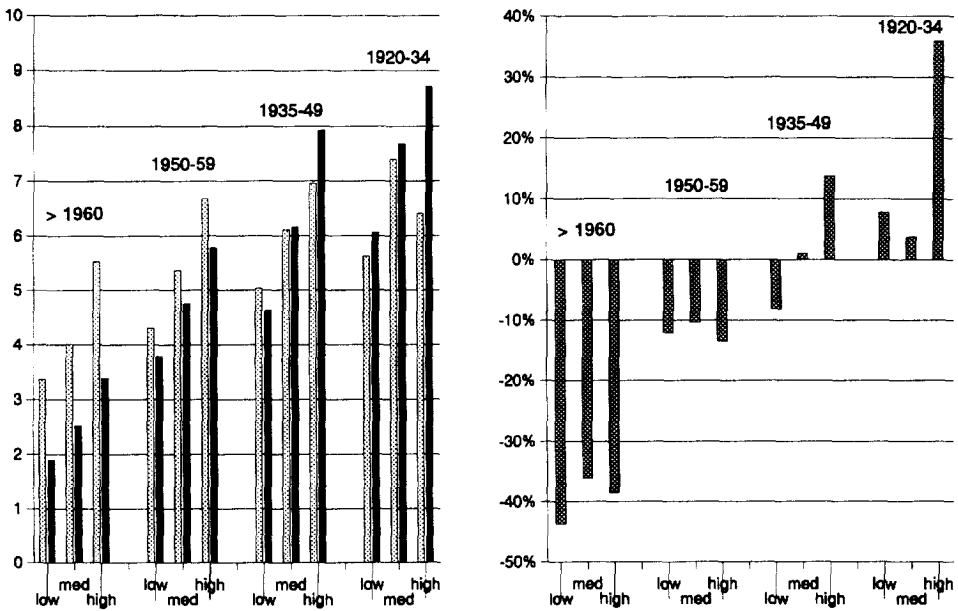


Fig. 6. Time spent on reading in 1975 (light-colored bars) and in 1995 (dark-colored bars), and proportional shifts (%) between 1975 and 1995, by cohort and education. All results controlled for differences due to number of working hours and sex. For the cohort 'after 1960' information on 1980 was analysed (instead of 1975). Source: SCP TBO-1975 ($N=1.309$), TBO-1980 ($N=2.370$), TBO-1995 ($N=3.227$).

downward trend in reading continued, although less precipitously than before, and in about equal measure for books, newspapers and magazines. The long-term decline can, in large part, be attributed to the shrinking portion of the general public that reads books, newspapers, or magazines on a regular basis.

The second question addressed the issue of whether specific social categories deviated from the general trend. During the entire 1955–1995 period, we observed a steeper decline for men than for women. In 1995, as a consequence, women on average read more than men, a reversal of the situation in 1955. Next, we found that, for the 1975–1995 period, the cohorts born between 1920 and 1939, deviated from the general pattern because they had increased rather than decreased their reading. This age effect, i.e., reading more as one grows older, did not appear among any of the other cohorts analyzed. Among the post-war generations, moreover, each newly entering five-year cohort spent a lower percentage of leisure time on reading than its immediate predecessor. Apparently, reading is in retreat through cohort replacement.

Our third research question dealt with four possible explanations of the observed downward trend in reading. This was connected with the question of why prognoses from the 1950s and 1960s, which promised a bright future for reading, did not come true. The combination of paid work and domestic tasks by members of the post-war generations of double-income families, and the increasing diversity in leisure activities, explained part of the observed decline. Also, the disproportionate expansion of

the supply of reading matter seems to have harmed the appreciation of printed media. With respect to the last explanation, however, we must be cautious because the available data do not allow for pronouncements of a definitive nature.

The most widely defended argument – television viewing is the predominant rival of leisure reading – was tested as the fourth explanation. In order to do this, we used a hypothesis on selective substitution, the first variant of which turned out to be untenable. The replacement of leisure reading by television did not appear to have taken place least among the highly educated, competent readers. Our results did, however, support the socialization variant of the substitution thesis. Those individuals socialized in a culture of reading and printed matter, had the lowest rates of reading-to-television replacement. Moreover, the generations born after 1950 and grown up in the era of television had, in accordance with our expectations, taken the change to television furthest. The differences in the degree of substitution implies that the remaining group of readers now consists largely of intermediate and higher-educated individuals from the pre-war cohorts. Among the older generations the higher-educated held on to leisure reading longest. This phenomenon is, by the way, not unique for reading. Similar developments have been found in the Netherlands for the audiences of classical performing arts (Knulst, 1989), and museums (de Haan, 1996).

It is questionable whether the downward trend in leisure reading can be stopped. The factors putting pressure on reading are all indicative of a restless and consumptive culture, one that is typical of western countries. A less hectic and more sober life style would surely benefit reading, as would decreased opportunities for watching television. However, it is unrealistic to expect that this will happen in the near future. Reading is deemed very valuable, but a governmental policy restricting public freedom for the sake of reading is hard to imagine. The various causes of the downward trend in leisure reading will probably remain effective and single measures to promote reading will prove no match. Moreover, one must be attentive to the counter-productive effects of the promotion of reading by policy directed at extra supply of facilities (cf. section 5.3).

Future research on trends in leisure reading could address the issue of which types of reading matter, and which types of readers, are most susceptible to the attractions of television. Do literary genres and literary readers belong to this group, or is the reading of popular romantic fiction replaced by watching soap television (Kraaykamp, 1993; Beentjes and van der Voort, 1989)? The impact of textual presentations through the new interactive media deserves further attention as well. Koolstra et al. (1997) found positive effects for children of subtitled television program viewing. Does this also apply to adults? Are they better at processing elaborate texts the more subtitled movies they have watched? Are experienced users of textual information through screens also equipped to understand written expressions of western civilization? In general, the question could be how important 'literacy' will remain in a society that demands more and more 'informacy'.

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