

**THE DECLINE OF READING.
LEISURE READING TRENDS IN THE NETHERLANDS (1955-1995)**

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1. Leisure Reading Trends: Background and Research Questions

There was growing public concern in the eighties about leisure time reading. According to popular American critics, interest in the printed media had declined due to the rising appeal of television (Postman, 1986; Hirsch, 1987). Ironically enough, their printed words of doom attracted mass attention and were widely circulated. Their notion, however, that interest in reading was declining, was not unfounded. Several studies from Western countries support it. 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) demonstrated that reading newspapers had exhibited a particularly sharp fall. The percentage of Americans who read a daily paper fell from 85 per cent in 1957 to 63 per cent in 1977. Samuel (1996) observed a similar downward trend for France. In 1967, 60 per cent of the French read a newspaper every day, but by 1988 this was only true of 41 per cent. As for the Netherlands, Knulst (1991) noted a decline between 1975 and 1985, but for magazines and books as well as newspapers. A recent study by Cushman et al. (1996) shows that the interest in printed media has diminished throughout the West.

The fall in leisure reading was not foreseen, at least not in the Netherlands. On the contrary, the research institutions that formulated predictions a few decades ago were far more optimistic about the future of reading. In a study conducted in the fifties on leisure behavior, the Central Bureau of Statistics made the following prediction: "Since the number of youngsters attending institutions of higher education is expected to rise in the near future, their reading is likely to increase as well. If the pocket book boom is taken into account, it seems warranted to assume a substantial increase in the reading frequency of the average Dutch person" (CBS, 1959: p.41). Two decades later, the Scientific Council for Governmental Policy was still assuming that the proportion of frequent readers would rise (WRR, 1997: p.93). Again a rise in higher educational levels was cited as the main factor that was to lead to a growing number of readers among the Dutch population. In addition, the demand for reading

matter would burgeon because the future public would be eager for detailed information on various hobbies and interests.

Of the predictions outlined here, the rise in educational attainment has proven 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 in 1920 and 1960, and from 8.3 to 11.8 years for women in these cohorts (Ganzeboom, 1996). The predictions on the expanding supply of reading matter also came true (CBS, 1995). In the last four decades, the Dutch reading audience was really pampered with an abundant amount of reading matter. Beside a growing number of books, including a continuous plenitude of cheap pocket editions and an ever-expanding assortment of magazines on all kinds of topics, they were provided with an extensive network of public libraries. Yet despite the fact that the conditions that were deemed essential were amply met, there has been no evidence of the expected rise in leisure reading. Instead, the opposite occurred. The Dutch read considerably less in the 1990s than in the 1950s (Knulst & 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 was published entitled "Reading Habits. Half a Century of Research on Reading and its Rivals" (Knulst & Kraaykamp, 1996). Our article summarizes some of research results and supplements them, since it also considers the most recent data from 1995. This study mainly focusses on *why* the 1959 and 1977 prognoses cited above have *not* come true. This central topic can be split up into three research questions. *Which trends in leisure time reading have occurred in the Netherlands since the 1950s? Did the observed trends occur equally in all the segments of the population? How can the peculiarities in these shifts be explained?* In our research questions, we view reading as an activity people undertake at their own initiative. Consequently, reading is studied as leisure behaviour. There are very few indications that reading related to educational or occupational obligations is in decline, so it is not addressed here.

The state of affairs with respect to reading has been receiving special attention for quite some time. There are two main reasons why. First, more philosophical scholars argue that reading gives people access to the accomplishments of Western civilization (Hirsch, 1987; Bloom, 1988). This information on scientific, political and social issues is considered indispensable for a democratic political system. These authors, and many others with them, view books as bearers of culture, which is why policies are implemented in various countries to promote reading. In the Netherlands, this is done on quite a large scale. The government creates favourable conditions for a widely varied press and book production (facilities for newspaper and opinion magazine publishers, fixed book prices, grants and library lending fees for writers), and reading itself is actively encouraged. The curriculum in literary reading at school reaches all the

students, and in even the smallest Dutch town, state-funded public libraries offer abundant opportunities for borrowing books.

Reading is also indispensable in the process of acquiring cognitive competence and skills. People who turn their back on reading are merely harming their own interests. "The more we read, the more knowledge we gain," as Hirsch (p.28) noted. Indeed, in the educational system, reading still plays a central role in the transmission of knowledge and the development of cognitive competence (Wagner, 1986; Stedman & Kaestle, 1987). Moreover, literacy and reading proficiency are necessary skills for achieving high occupational or income levels, as studies by Hauser & Huang (1997) and Hanson & Farell (1995) demonstrate.

2. Data and Research Design

To assess the interest in reading, scholars typically use survey estimates of reading frequencies (how often do you read?), or of the time spent on it (how much time do you generally spend reading?). A disadvantage of this method is that it usually overestimates the actual reading behavior (Knulst & Kraaykamp, 1996: p.145). A more valid assessment is the detailed registration of people's time budgets (Van der Voort, 1991; Robinson & Godbey, 1997). That is how the data in this article have been obtained. The budget method requires people to record all their activities in a diary, every quarter of an hour throughout a whole week. The advantage of this method is that people cannot register more activities than the available time allows for. Like other types of media use, in time budget research, reading is incorporated in a broader 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 the 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 of this time budget method is, however, that it is demanding and takes a lot of the respondents' time.

In the Netherlands, time budget research has a certain tradition. The first study to include time budget information on reading habits was carried out as early as 1934-1935. However, it only gathered information on employees and servants, so it cannot be easily compared to more recent data. After World War II, the Central Bureau of Statistics continued the tradition (CBS, 1959). This resulted in nationally representative data on leisure behaviour for 1955-1956, even though the registration of activities was limited to the free evenings on weekdays (from 5.30 p.m. to midnight) and the weekends (Saturdays from noon to midnight and Sundays from 8.00 a.m. to midnight). This time budget research was repeated in 1962-1963, so measures are available of the period shortly before and during the advent of television in Dutch society.

After these two measurement waves, the Central Bureau of Statistics did not

replicate this type of time budget research and it was not until 1975 that a new study was initiated. At the time, a number of associated research agencies conducted an updated representative time budget study (TBO). Since then, this time budget study has been repeated every five years in the month of October. Like the CBS studies, this series of studies has been carried out among people above the age of twelve, but unlike the CBS studies, these new time budget studies cover seven full days a week (672 quarters of an hour from early Sunday morning to midnight on Saturday). As one of the initiators of the research, the Social and Cultural Planning Office has reported extensively on these time budget studies. Our article is based on the 1975-1995 series of time budget studies as processed by the SCP, and the above-mentioned CBS studies from 1955 and 1962. Taken together, these national time budget data provide a reliable source for the description of forty years of reading.

3. Four Decades of Leisure Reading (1955-1995)

We start by describing how reading behaviour has developed since the 1950s (our first research question). Shifts in the time spent watching television will be included in this discussion, since television viewing is considered a direct competitor of reading (McLuhan, 1964; Roberts et al., 1984; Van der Voort, 1991). Table 1 gives an overview of the hours spent reading and watching television as of 1955. The data gathered in 1975 and later cover the entire week, whereas data from the earlier CBS studies are based on the 60.5 hours mentioned earlier (Note 1 below Table 1). By also restricting the more recent data to reading and watching television during the same cut-out, all the measurements can be compared in absolute terms (see the two right-hand columns in Table 1).

Table 1 shows that on the eve of the television era in 1955, the Dutch spent about five hours reading (about 21 per cent of an average of 24 hours of free time). These five hours are about twice the reading time observed in 1995. Before assuming that the popularity of reading back then is related to the quality of the reading material, one should realize that virtually all types of entertainment attracted more of an audience back then. Cinemas, theatres, and dance halls attracted more people in the 1950s than they do nowadays, and the radio was at the peak of its popularity as well. Rather than high quality, it seems to have been the limited range of choices that explains the eagerness of the audience in those days.

This period of relative entertainment scarcity ceased by the end of the 1950s, when the television, hi-fi equipment and the private automobile 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. Since then, the time spent reading has diminished steadily, although most strongly in the 1960s. Reading still occupied an average of 21 per cent of people's leisure time in 1955, but seven years later,

Table 1: Time Spent Reading and Watching Television from 1955 to 1995 in Hours a Week (as primary and secondary activity).

	hours in a full week (168 hour)						hours on weekday evenings and weekends (60.5 hours) ¹	
	reading			watching television			reading	watching television
	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 ²	5.4 ²
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

¹ Five weekday evenings from 5.30 p.m. to midnight, Saturdays from noon to midnight and Sundays from 8.00 a.m. to 24.00.

² Partially estimated. In 1962, unlike 1955, Saturday mornings from 8.00 a.m. to 12.00 were also surveyed and thus an extra of 4 hours of leisure time was available. Consequently, the total amount of 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 above the age of 12 (N=7,230)).

CBS 1965 (Dutch population above the age of 12 (N=4,008)).

SCP TBO 1975-1995 ((Dutch population above the age of 12: 1975 (N=1,309), 1980 (N=2,730), 1985 (N=3,262), 1990 (N=3,158), 1995 (N=3,227)).

in 1962, it was 17 percent, and by 1975 it had been reduced to only 13 percent. After that, the proportion of leisure reading diminished further (to 9 per cent in 1995), but this decline was no longer as dramatic as at the advent of television. The advance of television was most impressive during its initial stage: from 0.2 hours in 1955 to 10.1 hours in 1975. In the following twenty years up to 1995, the increase in time spent watching television was a relatively modest one of 0.8 hours (within the CBS 60.5 hours).

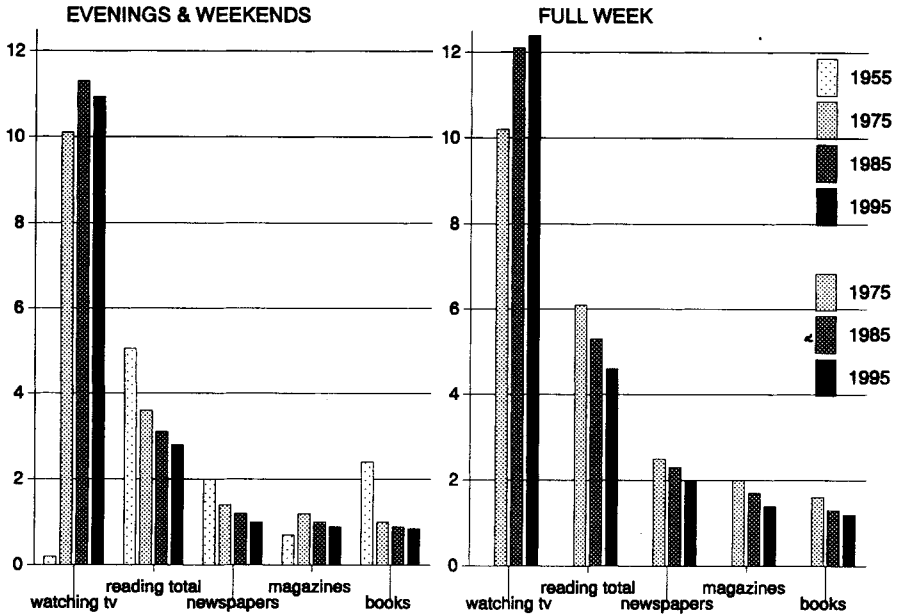
Table 1 also gives information covering the entire week in this second twenty-year period (1975-1995). Extra aspects have also been measured. For instance, from 1975 onwards the amount of time was measured the audience

spent watching television with full attention (no secondary activities) and the amount of time they spent combining television viewing with other activities (such as taking care of children or talking to other members of the household). This distinction with respect to the degree of attention was also drawn for reading since 1990 (for example, reading may be combined with having breakfast or listening to music). This information on the entire week leads to the conclusion that between 1975 and 1995, the time spent reading (as primary activity) declined from 6.1 to 4.6 hours. In 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. Yet a decline in reading seems to go hand in hand with this trend, even if the largest shifts are not found in the second twenty-year period, but in the first. In addition, the amount of time spent watching television and reading combined with other activities have both increased. As a result, in 1995 people read more in addition to other activities than in 1990, but this upward shift of 0.2 hours cannot compensate for the decline of 0.5 hours in reading as primary activity. If the two modalities of watching television are taken together as well, then the advance of the television in 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 research subject. Whenever we refer to reading, we mean reading as primary activity.

So far, we have addressed trends in the total amount of reading, which might be overly simplified. Figure 1 consequently shows how time is divided between different types of reading matter. For the comparison with 1955, we again differentiated between information on the CBS cut-out (left-hand panel) and information on the full week (right-hand panel). It is clear from the left part of Figure 1 that especially reading books and newspapers declined from 1955 to 1995. Within the CBS segment of 60.5 hours, the time spent reading books diminished from 2.4 hours in 1955 to 0.9 in 1995. The sharpest decline occurred in the period up to 1975. With regard to newspaper reading, a more gradual, albeit uninterrupted decline is observed. Surprisingly, until 1975, the time spent reading magazines increased. We will not comment on this development here, but this diversion of the trend is related to the introduction of a number of innovations on the Dutch magazine market (integral color printing, the rise of the celebrity gossip press). They could not however establish a lasting upsurge, as the decrease of interest in magazines between 1975 and 1995 reveals.

The CBS cut-out, which is our bench mark 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. Yet, assuming that in the 1950s reading only took place after work, the moments when people read might have changed since then and people might read less in the evenings and weekends and more on weekdays in the daytime (outside the CBS segment). Although we do not have any information on daytime weekday reading for the period 1955-1975, we do have data for

Figure 1: Time Spent Reading (books, newspapers and magazines) and Watching Television in Hours a Week from 1955 to 1995, Population above the Age of 12¹



¹ The left-hand chart considers hours spent on weekday evenings and weekends (CBS cut-out), whereas the right-hand one considers hours spent in 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).

the 1975-1995 period (right-hand part of Figure 1). Figure 1 shows that this kind of shift only occurred with regard to reading newspapers. In 1975, 44 per cent of the time spent reading daily papers fell outside the selected CBS segment, whereas in 1995 it was 50 per cent. A plausible reason for this is that during this period, a number of newspapers converted from an evening paper into a morning one. The results representing the total amount of reading time do not display this shift. In 1975, 44 per cent of all the reading occurred outside the CBS cut-out, and in 1995 this still was 40 per cent. So between 1975 and 1995, a similar decline in reading can be observed in and outside the CBS 60.5 hours segment.

The results described above are an arithmetic product of the percentage of the sample that actually reads and the time they spend reading. A more detailed analysis, which is not reported here (Knulst & Kraaykamp, 1996), shows that the decline between 1975 and 1995 can be largely attributed to the diminishing number of readers in a weekly range. In 1995, newspapers and magazines reached about two-thirds of the Dutch population every week (counting all the

readers who spent at least a quarter of an hour reading), whereas in 1975, this weekly range was still 80 per cent. The percentage of the Dutch who read any books during the week diminished from 49 per cent in 1975 to 38 per cent in 1995. The people who did read newspapers and books in 1995, however, spent more time doing so than the larger group of readers two decades earlier. This demonstrates that especially newspaper and book readers who spent relatively little time reading have dropped out. For magazines, both aspects are declining. The number of magazine readers as well as the time the remaining readers spend on magazines diminished.

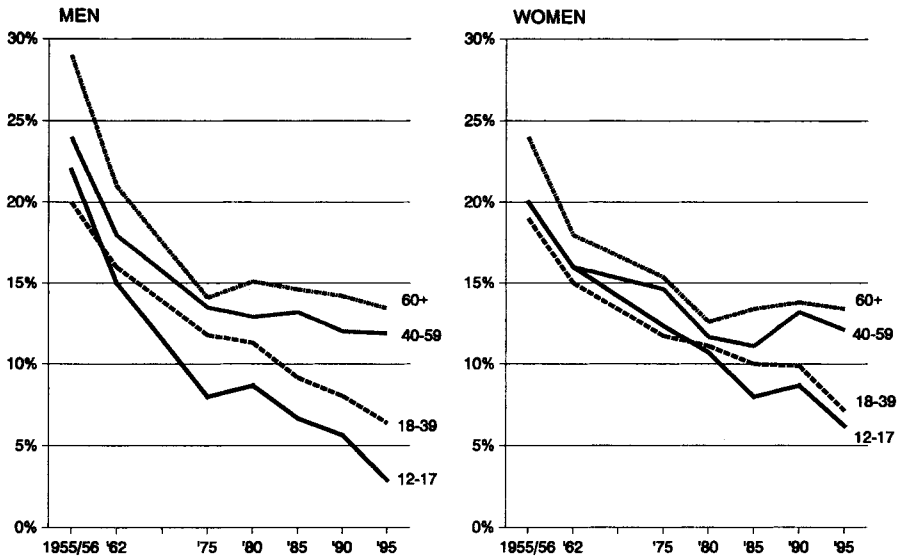
4. Trends in Leisure Reading for Distinct Social Categories

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

It seems quite relevant to examine gender differences in leisure reading (Greany, 1980; Radway, 1984). In the 1950s, the CBS study on leisure behaviour cited substantial differences between the reading habits of men and women (CBS, 1959). At the time, the 6.2 hours average weekly reading time for men were considerably longer than the 4.2 hours for women. In our analysis, the time spent reading has been calculated for men and women separately for the 1955-1995 period, and these results are also divided into different age groups (Figure 2). The time spent reading books, newspapers and magazines is expressed as a percentage of the total amount of leisure time.

Figure 2 shows a diminishing percentage of leisure time spent reading for men and women in all the age groups. In addition, the figure shows that, for nearly all the age groups, reading decreased most sharply between 1955 and 1975. From 1975 to 1995, most of the categories show a less marked decline. If we devote specific attention to the differences between men and women, we discern a reduction from 29 to 13 per cent of the time spent reading among men above the age of 60. Among young men below the age of 20, the decline was much sharper, from 22 per cent in 1955 to only 3 per cent in 1995. Among women, the general change has been less striking. In 1955, women above the age of 60 spent about 24 per cent of their leisure time reading, and by 1995 this had fallen to 13 per cent, which is similar to the percentage of time men of a comparable age spent reading. Among girls and young women below the age of 20, the decline from 20 to 7 per cent is again large, although it is smaller than it was for young men. As a result of this more modest decline, women who initially read less than men currently seem to read more than their male counterparts. These results are in

Figure 2: Time Spent Reading as Percentage of Total Leisure Time from 1955 to 1995, by Sex and Age, Population above the Age of 12¹



¹ The results for CBS 1955 and CBS 1962 pertain to a percentage of the total leisure time on weekday evenings and weekends (CBS limited survey), while the results for 1975-1995 deal with the total leisure time in a full week (7 days).

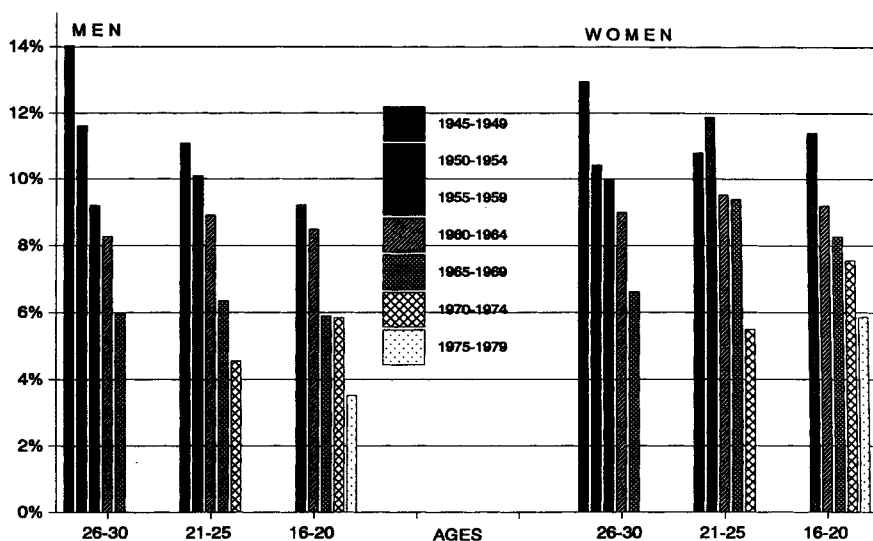
Source: CBS 1955 (N=7,230), CBS 1962 (N=4,008); SCP TBO 1975 (N=1,309), TBO 1980 (N=2,370), TBO 1985 (N=3,262), TBO 1990 (N=3,158), TBO 1995 (N=3,227).

line with research carried out by McKenna et al. (1995), who conclude that in the United States, women exhibit a more positive attitude towards leisure reading than men.

Our analysis reveals that older people read more than younger ones, even if all the age groups have spent a smaller percentage of their free time reading over the last few decades. Here we come across two opposite tendencies. The time spent reading seems to increase as people get older (Robinson, 1980; Smith, 1995). If this age effect was the only 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, i.e. a cohort effect, plays a role as well. The significance of reading as a part of people's upbringing can be assumed to have diminished for each subsequent generation. Thus, leisure behaviour including only a scanty reading menu would be expected to develop from the bottom up (by means of cohort replacement).

Figure 3 also shows the cohort and age effects described above. It gives the amount of time the different cohorts spent reading as they moved through the

Figure 3: Time Spent Reading as Percentage of Total Leisure Time for 16 to 30 Age Groups, by Sex and Birth Cohort (1975-1995)

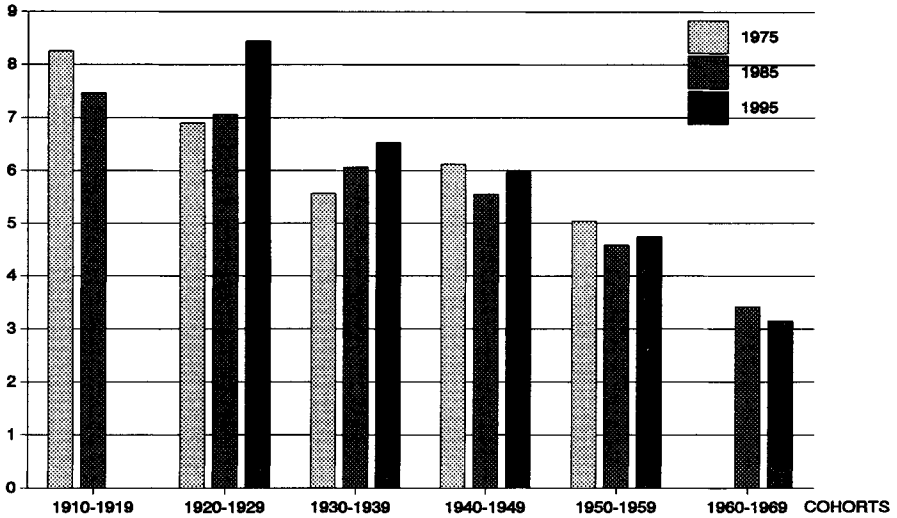


Source: SCP TBO 1975 (N=1,309), TBO 1980 (N=2,370), TBO 1985 (N=3,262), TBO 1990 (N=3,158), TBO 1995 (N=3,227).

life cycle. Again, reading time is expressed as a percentage of the total amount of leisure time. Figure 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 spent on average 14 per cent of their leisure time reading, and men born between 1965 and 1969 only 6 per cent. Yet there are also age effects. The oldest cohorts read more from the ages of 26 to 30 than from 21 to 25. However, this age effect seems to fade away among the younger cohorts. Similar results can be discerned for women, be it that the female cohorts of most of the age groups read more than the male cohorts.

It has been shown above that the impact of age on leisure time reading diminishes over the cohorts. Figure 4 examines this development in greater detail. For this analysis, we considered three measurement years, cohorts clustered into groups spanning 10 years, and reading time expressed in hours a week. This demonstrates that for the recent cohorts, it can no longer be argued that reading increases as people grow older. The turning point lies with the 1940-1949 cohort, since age effects did occur among the generations born between 1920 and 1940. People born from 1930 to 1939, who were between 35 and 45 in 1975 and read on average 5.5 hours at the time, read on average 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 from 1920 to 1929, belongs to a category of

Figure 4: Time Spent Reading in Hours a Week by Birth Cohort, Population Aged 16 to 75 (1975-1995)¹



¹ All the results have been 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).

the population that, contrary to 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 among the post-war cohorts, especially those born after 1950. The reading differences between the cohorts presented in Figure 4 cannot be attributed to omitted factors, 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 we account for the fact that reading has declined most strongly among the post-war cohorts (our third research question)? This is all the more striking because they happen to be the cohorts with the best educational opportunities and ample access to a developed infrastructure for readers. These favourable circumstances have *not* yielded the positive effects on reading that might have been expected. Which other factors played a role? What was overlooked in the earlier prognoses? Below, we consider four possible explanations. The tenability

of our fourth explanation, citing the growing appeal of television, will be 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 also need an opportunity to concentrate on reading for a considerable stretch of time (Knulst, 1991). Both of these conditions were probably met more easily in the 1950s than nowadays, especially for men. Around 1955, men and women each had their own separate tasks. Housekeeping and nursing belonged to the domain of women, paid work and maintenance chores to that of men. Women's domestic chores were scattered throughout the day, so that bits of leisure time alternated with these obligations. Under this regime, men had a clearer division between work and leisure. After work, i.e. in the evenings and on Sundays, they were usually free. This continuity that characterized men's leisure time seemed to be a favourable condition for activities that require serious concentration, such as reading.

In the decades that followed, this role pattern has gradually broken down. Married women are increasingly active in the labour force and men engage more frequently in domestic chores and child care (SCP, 1996). Both of these trends have had the most marked effects on the time budgets of men and women between the ages of 25 and 45, since it is during that phase of life that the peak in the occupational career coincides with the 'rush hour' in the family cycle. In this exacting phase of life, dual responsibilities have now become quite common, although it should be noted that women still do the lion's share of the domestic chores and men still do most of the paid work. The post-war cohorts, especially the men and women with intermediate or higher levels of education, were first confronted with this situation between the ages of 25 and 45. As a result, the people we are referring to have four hours less leisure time than earlier generations, when men and women each only had one kind of obligation. In addition, men's leisure time is now also more fragmented by domestic chores.

Due to the phenomenon of combined chores described above, we might expect a downward trend in reading since the 1950s. Additional analyses show that the increasing number of responsibilities had especially unfavorable ramifications for men (Knulst & Kraaykamp, 1996). Yet, among women aged 25 to 45 with intermediate or higher schooling, whose combined chores have increased as well, no negative effect on their reading time can be discerned. Apparently, women are better at adjusting their reading habits to a schedule that includes fragmented tasks. The observed effect among men, however, only touches upon part of the total decline in reading.

5.2 An increasing number of leisure alternatives

The growing competition among leisure alternatives might be a second explana-

tion for the decline in reading (Knulst, 1991). Substantial increases in wealth and spatial mobility since the 1950s enabled the average Dutch person to engage in a growing number of leisure activities. New entertainment opportunities emerged inside and outside the home. According to the prediction of the Scientific Council for Governmental Policy (WRR, 1977) mentioned above, broader personal interests would benefit reading, as there would be more topics to read about. Plausible as this argument sounded at the time, it overlooked the scarcity of leisure. The more new activities people engage in, the less time they have left for the old ones, such as reading.

Additional analyses do indeed show that, since 1975, the time spent reading has declined more for people with a broad leisure repertoire than with a small one (Knulst & Kraaykamp, 1996). Going out and engaging in sports emerge as serious rivals of reading. However, this effect can only explain part of the total observed decline in reading, since it is only observed among people with lower educational levels. This group is small and atypical, since a broad leisure repertoire is most common among people with intermediate and higher levels of education.

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 reduced by the abundance of reading matter. As we emphasized in our introduction, a broad supply of printed matter accessible to the entire population is viewed by current cultural policy as a definite advantage. The more reading matter is available, the better it is for the reading audience. This was the line of reasoning of the authors who formulated the expectations on a possible increase in reading. These expectations are based on the misconception that collectively appreciated cultural goods are not subject to economic laws and that the demand for information remains, regardless of the amount supplied. This goes against Gossen's first economic law, which states that up until the point when the demand is saturated, the added value of consumption goods is reduced if the opportunity for consumption (supply) is increased. Contrary to this economic law, the reasons for the decline in leisure reading are rarely sought at the supply side, but are typically expected to lie in the lack of opportunities for consumption. The decline in leisure reading is accounted for in cultural politics by extra supply and facilities. A situation of 'information overload' can thus emerge.

Statistical information indicates a marked expansion of the supply in reading matter. From 1955 to 1993, the number of books available at public libraries increased about twelvefold (CBS, 1995). The inclination to increasingly expand the supply was not only evident in the public sector, but in the market sector as well. Since 1955, the number of book titles increased by 217 per cent. At the same time, the actual use made of this supply in these four decades continually

diminished. The extent to which the declining demand can be attributed to the simultaneously expanding supply cannot be assessed with the available data. However, the presumed discouragement effect seems obvious with regard to certain printed matter. In the magazine sector, where the number of new titles rose by 60 per cent between 1975 and 1990, the purchase per household declined by 6 per cent (Knulst & Kraaykamp, 1996), and the time spent reading magazines also diminished considerably. The reported growth of the supply refers to magazines that are sold, and does not include the sharp increase in magazines that are distributed for free. It seems almost inevitable that the appreciation of periodically distributed reading matter, already challenged by the disproportionate increase in the regular supply of magazines, was further corroded by these additional free magazines.

5.4 An increasing rivalry with television

Television is by far the most frequently mentioned cause of waning reading habits. Although watching television can be assumed to be a relevant explanation for the decline in reading, we did not immediately want to cite this obvious cause. That is why we began by examining meaningful factors that are often overlooked. A negative impact on reading could be demonstrated or at least made plausible for the three explanations described so far. Yet the two hypotheses that could be tested empirically were not powerful enough to fully explain the downward trend in reading. This is why we addressed the extent to which the rising appeal of television is responsible for this decline.

Popular American critics (Postman, 1986; Bloom, 1987; Hirsch, 1987) mainly attribute the decline in reading to the attraction of television. The entertainment formula most television programmes are based on is thought to have become the normative standard for all leisure activities. Accordingly, the general audience is no longer thought to be familiar with reading matter that requires serious concentration, purely because the audience can not find any amusing and concise formula in more elaborate textual messages. Roberts et al. (1984) and Koolstra et al. (1997) have indeed been able to demonstrate that watching a lot of television harms the capacity to read and also has a negative impact on people's attitude towards reading. Compared to watching television, other types of information processing are then evaluated as being too difficult or strenuous (Stedman & Kaestle, 1987; Beentjes & van der Voort, 1989). Hence, the authors leave no doubt as to the negative impact of watching television on leisure reading in contemporary society.

Without positing a value judgement beforehand, the matter-of-fact import of this proposition seems reasonable. In selecting information or entertainment, the audience simply relies less on printed media than in the 1950s. Information and amusement were initially only available in print, but are now increasingly accessible on the screen as well. The Internet and cd-rom, relatively recent

innovations, can now also be used as substitutes for information guides and reference books, and romantic fiction is easily replaced by soap operas and films on television. In the next section, we will develop this argument into a replacement hypothesis and test it with our empirical data.

6. Selective Replacement of Leisure Reading by Watching Television

The initial phase of television in the 1955-1975 period in the Netherlands seems to have had a profound effect on leisure reading. In the following decades (1975-1995), reading appears to have lost additional ground. Broadcasting time gradually expanded, the number of public channels increased, and Dutch-spoken commercial stations were introduced (Knulst & Kalmijn, 1988; Knulst & Kraaykamp, 1996). So if watching television is gradually taking over the initial functions of reading, the question is whether this substitution is occurring throughout society.

To answer this question, it must be assumed that initially, the alternative of television was not something everyone was equally pleased by. It all depends on how much gratification people derived from the original good, in this case reading, and how much they could get in return by replacing reading by television viewing. We thus addressed the question of why reading is more important to one person than another. The information processing theory (Ganzeboom, 1982; Kraaykamp, 1993) and the assimilation theory (Frijda, 1988) consider the development of reading competence and routine as a result of learning processes and repeated utilization. Still, not everyone acquires those qualities to a similar degree. The more of these abilities people can draw from, the more pleasure they experience reading. Consequently, the more of these positive experiences they have, the more likely they are to adhere to reading. Accordingly, competent readers who have had rich reading experiences are least inclined to replace reading by audio-visual alternatives (Knulst, 1991).

The increasing attraction of television in society can be viewed as a diffusion process, with a progressively growing mass accepting television as a full-fledged alternative for reading. Depending on the degree to which an innovation is accepted, an advance guard and a rearguard can be distinguished in that process (Rogers, 1983). We assume the competent, experienced readers to be the last to accept television as a satisfactory supplier of information and entertainment. Who then are the competent and experienced readers in this rearguard? We have good reason (Hanson & Farrell, 1995; Smith, 1995) to consider the respondents' level of education a suitable indicator of reading competence. Well-educated people are thus expected to be competent readers and to have held on to reading more often than less educated people.

McLuhan (1964) argued that every medium creates its own world of cognitive images, so that adaptation to the environment depends on the medium dominant

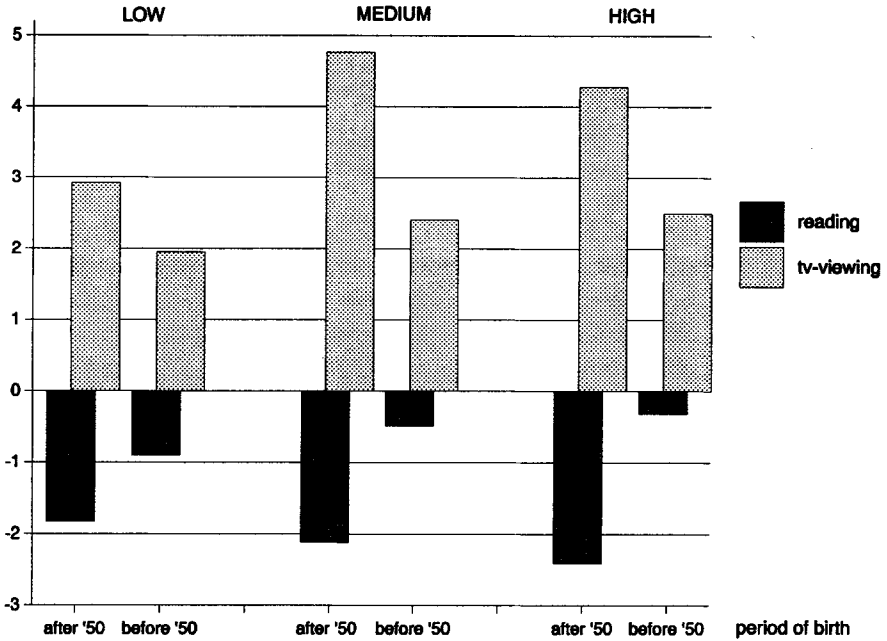
during a person's upbringing. As a consequence, people socialized with reading and the printed media are familiar with the representations and conventions of a written culture. Due in part to the scarcity of alternatives at the time, they will have acquired a great deal of routine in spending their leisure time reading. Hence, they can also be viewed as the rearguard that has not surrendered to television. The younger generations who grew up with television have never been that dependent on the printed media. In general, they have acquired less reading routine than people socialized before television. By 1965, television had penetrated about half the Dutch living rooms. Since our data do not provide direct information on the availability of a television set in the period when the respondents were brought up, we assume that persons who were above the age of 15 in 1965 were being socialized in a culture of reading. Accordingly, the year 1950 is used as a boundary between the generations. Cohorts born before 1950 are expected to have replaced reading by watching television less frequently than cohorts born after 1950.

So to explain differences in the replacement of reading by watching television, we use a competence hypothesis, with educational level as the determinant for the degree of adaptation, and a socialization hypothesis, with birth cohort as the determinant. Both of the expectations have been tested in Figure 5. The observed trends in the amount of time spent reading and watching television from 1975 to 1995 have been plotted against educational level and birth cohort. We distinguish three educational categories, which are broken down by birth cohort. In order to control for the impact of differences in time restrictions (a lot of leisure time means more of an opportunity for reading and watching television), changes in time spent reading and watching television have been indexed to an average amount of leisure time of 47 hours a week.

Figure 5 clearly shows that all the groups have witnessed an increase in watching television and a decrease in reading. Our results also indicate that the socialization period exerts the strongest influence on changes in reading. Irrespective of their educational level, people born after 1950 diminished their reading time more than people born before 1950. What is most striking is that the decline of 2.4 hours in reading among the cohorts born after 1950 with a college or university education has been stronger than the decline among both of the less educated cohorts (1.9 and 0.9 hours respectively). Thus the assumption that educational level is the main determinant of reading habits is only confirmed with respect to the cohorts born before 1950. The better educated did indeed reduce their reading time to a lesser degree than the less educated.

Our analysis would tend to confirm the socialization hypothesis. Yet it cannot be denied that, taken together, the better educated respondents spent more time reading than the less educated ones. Every survey has come up with this same result, and the authors of the predictions mentioned above assumed it meant that

Figure 5: Changes in Weekly Number of Hours Spent Reading and Watching Television from 1975 to 1995, by Education and Period of Birth¹



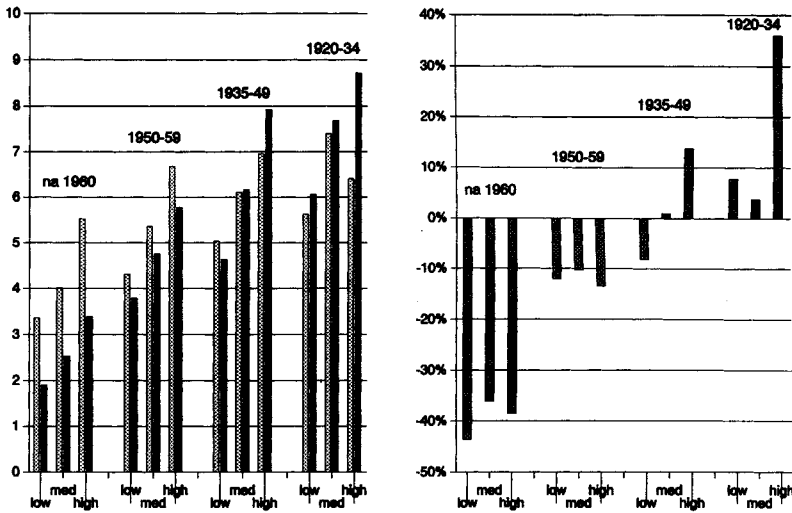
¹ All the results have been controlled for a change in the average number of leisure hours from 1975 to 1995 (i.e. standardized towards 47 hours of leisure time a week).

Source: SCP TBO 1975 (N=1,309), TBO 1995 (N=3,227).

reading would increase if more people had a better education. Why hasn't this prediction come true? One possible answer can be found in Figure 6.

Figure 6 shows reading figures for 1975 and 1995, including the percentage changes (right-hand panel) for four birth cohorts. Again, for each cohort three levels of education are distinguished. Within each of the four cohorts, the better educated respondents read more than the less educated ones. In each cohort, the average amount of time spent reading is less than in the preceding ones. As a consequence, the differences between readers with similar educational levels but from different generations have become very large. For example, in 1995 the better educated respondents, i.e. with a college or university education, in the cohort born after 1969 already read less than the less educated respondents in the cohorts born from 1920 to 1934 and from 1935 to 1949. The right-hand part of Figure 6 shows that in the 1920-1949 cohorts, nearly all the educational categories increased their reading time between 1975 and 1995, which is in accordance with the operative age effect. However, this effect is strongest for

Figure 6: Time Spent Reading in 1975 (light bars) and 1995 (dark bars), and Changes (in %) from 1975 to 1995, by Cohort and Education¹



¹ All the results have been 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).

the respondents with the highest educational levels. In the cohorts born after 1949, all the educational categories restricted their reading time. Here, the extent of the decline is hardly affected by their educational level.

7. Conclusion and Discussion

In this article, we examined the leisure reading trends in the Dutch population from 1955 to 1995. Our first question pertains to long-term shifts. The data covers a forty-year period and shows that the time spent reading has diminished by about half. The strongest decline, especially for books, was found in the initial phase of television (1955-1975). In the following twenty years, from 1975 to 1995, the downward trend continued, although less sharply than before, at about the same pace for books, newspapers and magazines. The long-term decline can largely be attributed to the smaller percentage of the general population who read books, newspapers, or magazines on a regular basis.

Our second question addressed whether specific social categories diverged from the general trend. Throughout the entire 1955-1995 period, we observed a steeper decline for men than women. As a consequence, in 1995 women on average read more than men. This situation was quite the opposite in 1955. Next,

we found that in the 1975-1995 period, the cohorts born from 1920 to 1939 diverged from the general pattern by increasing rather than decreasing their reading. This effect of age, i.e. reading more as one grows older, was not evident among any of the other cohorts. Moreover, among the post-war generations, each newly entering five-year cohort spent a lower percentage of leisure time reading than its immediate predecessor. Apparently, reading habits are declining through cohort replacement.

Our third research question dealt with four possible explanations for the downward trend in reading. It was connected with why prognoses made in the 1950s and 1960s, anticipating a bright future for reading, have not come true. The combination of paid and domestic work in the post-war generations of double-income families and the increasing diversity in leisure activities explained part of the decline. The mushrooming supply of reading matter also seems to have harmed the appreciation of printed media. With respect to this last explanation, however, we should be cautious, since the available data do not allow us to pass any final judgment.

The most widely defended argument, i.e. that watching television is the predominant rival of leisure reading, was tested as the fourth explanation. To do so, we used a hypothesis on selective substitution, the first variant of which turned out to be untenable. The replacement of leisure reading by watching television was not the least widespread among the highly educated, competent readers. Our results did, however, support the socialization variant of the substitution thesis. The respondents who were socialized in a culture of reading and printed matter were less apt to replace reading by watching television. Moreover, in accordance with our expectations, the generations born after 1950 and brought up in the era of television exhibited the most marked shift to television. The differences in the degree of substitution indicate that nowadays, the remaining group of readers, largely consists of people with an intermediate and higher education from the pre-war cohorts. Among the older generations, the better educated respondents have held on the longest to reading. This phenomenon, by the way, is not unique for reading. Similar trends have been observed in the Netherlands as regards the classical performing arts (Knulst, 1989) and museums (De Haan, 1996).

It seems questionable whether the downward trend in leisure reading can be stopped. The factors that put pressure on reading are all indicative of a more restless and consumption-oriented culture, which is typical of virtually all the Western countries. A less hectic and more sober life style would surely promote reading, as would fewer opportunities for watching television. However, it is unrealistic to expect this to happen in the near future. Reading is deemed very valuable, but an official 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 no single measure to promote reading is likely to turn the tide. Moreover, one should be wary of the counter-productive effects that a policy to promote reading by creating extra facilities could have (section 5.3).

Future research on reading trends could address the types of reading matter and types of readers that are most susceptible to the lure of television. Do certain literary genres and literary readers belong to this group, or has reading popular romantic fiction been replaced by watching soap operas on television (Kraaykamp, 1993; Beentjes & van der Voort, 1989)? The impact of textual presentations on the new interactive media deserves further attention as well. Koolstra et al. (1997) noted that watching subtitled television programmes for children had certain positive effects. Does this also apply to adults? Is it true that the more subtitled movies they have watched, the better they are at processing elaborate textual material? And are experienced users of textual information on the screen also equipped to understand written expressions of Western civilization? More generally, how important will 'literacy' remain in a society that demands more and more 'informacy'?

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