

READING AND THE READING CLASS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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■ **Abstract** Sociological research on reading, which formerly focused on literacy, now conceptualizes reading as a social practice. This review examines the current state of knowledge on (a) who reads, i.e., the demographic characteristics of readers; (b) how they read, i.e., reading as a form of social practice; (c) how reading relates to electronic media, especially television and the Internet; and (d) the future of reading. We conclude that a reading class is emerging, restricted in size but disproportionate in influence, and that the Internet is facilitating this development.

INTRODUCTION

Researchers once studied reading in terms of literacy, asking who could read, how people learned to read, and what difference literacy made to socioeconomic development. Much of this work was inspired by the assumption that literacy was key to development and to individual social mobility, an assumption that skeptics called the “literacy myth” (Graff 1987). Although literacy raises valid questions, in the 1990s the research focus shifted to reading as a social practice, now asking who reads what, how people read, and how their reading relates to their other activities. This review draws together what sociologists and other scholars know about these questions. Its sections examine the demographic characteristics of readers and reading as a form of social practice. Our emphasis is on reading (especially reading books) as a leisure-time activity; this emphasis is consistent with conventional scholarly usage. We review the research on reading and electronic media (especially television) and then look at the emerging data on the relationship between reading and the Internet. We conclude with our thesis that a reading class is emerging, restricted in size but disproportionate in influence, and that the Internet is facilitating this development.

The sociology of reading is intellectually robust but organizationally dispersed. Much of the research takes place in history departments, where the well-established “history of the book” has given rise to a “history of reading” (Amtower 2000,

Andersen & Sauer 2002, Coleman 1996). The two overlap, but the former emphasizes books as material objects, whereas the latter recognizes books as part of a system involving readers, writers, technologies, publishers, editors, texts, booksellers, reviewers, and schools. This books-in-the-broader-context approach is sociological, whether applied to historical or contemporary materials. A second field of inquiry is that of new literacy studies, which may take place in departments of education or English and which emphasize literacies in the plural (Olson & Torrance 2001). Gender studies are a third academic base, emphasizing a key variable to the understanding of the who, what, and how of reading (Currie 1999, Parush 2004). Area studies and ethnic studies sometimes play a role as well (McHenry 2002, Newell 2002). And card-carrying sociologists, typically those involved in cultural sociology, have focused attention on reading.

We take this broad domain, this dispersed set of subfields, as the actors producing a sociology of reading. We draw upon them in exploring four questions.

WHO READS?

The short answer to who reads is just about everyone. This is the case in the West and Japan, and is increasingly the case in the developing world. Polls show that most Americans and Europeans read during their leisure time. In a “normal day,” people report spending an average of over a half hour reading magazines, close to three quarters of an hour reading newspapers, and over an hour reading books; moreover, the overwhelming majority report reading some from all three categories of reading each day. Books involve the heaviest time commitment. Although a quarter of people do not read any books in a typical day, more than half read books for over an hour. In 1998, when the General Social Survey asked if respondents had “read novels, short stories, poems, or plays, other than those required by work or school” during the past twelve months, 70% reported that they had (Gen. Soc. Surv. 1998).

People think they ought to read even more. More than nine out of ten are convinced that reading is “a good use of your time” (Gallup Org. 1990, question 23). And they think they ought to be able to read more, for very few people find reading “too hard to do” (Gallup Org. 1990, question 48b). They expect to read more in the future. When asked, “Do you think you’ll find yourself reading more in the months and years ahead, reading less, or is the amount of reading you do probably going to stay the same,” 45% said more, 3% less, and 51% the same (Gallup Org. 1990, question 24). People particularly intend to read more materials that are educational or will improve their lives, such as nonfiction books, newspapers, and the Bible. A British survey finds that people actually believe they are reading more. “Despite competition from new media, and increasing pressure on people’s leisure time, relatively few people think they are reading books less now than five years ago. Most (80%) claim to be reading about the same or more” (Book Mark. Ltd. 2000, p. 9). Most Britons report that the only thing that would make them read more is having more leisure time.

The demographic characteristics of readers have remained constant: Reading is associated above all with education. This association is the case worldwide. A 20-country survey concludes that “formal educational attainment is the main determinant of literacy proficiency. For 17 of the 20 countries it is both the first and the strongest predictor” (OECD Stat. Can. 2000, p. 58). In addition to education level, reading is associated with affluence (affluent people read more), race (whites read more than African Americans or Hispanics), gender (women read more than men), and place of residence (suburbanites read more than rural or inner city residents) (Book Mark. Ltd. 2000, NEA 2004; see also Cushman et al. 1996 for the universality of the gender difference).

Historically, reading by the populace at large began as a metropolitan phenomenon. Cities that were commercial or administrative centers—Shanghai, Lagos, Moscow—have led the rest of their respective countries in the literacy and print revolutions, although more strictly industrial cities have lagged behind the others (Brooks 1985, Furet & Ozouf 1982, Griswold 2000, Link 1981). Men gain literacy first, but when this difference evens out, women read more.

Another universal pattern is that as soon as a popular reading culture gets established, commentators start worrying about the decline of reading. Headlines from China’s *People’s Daily* report that “Chinese People Read Less,” according to a new survey (People’s Daily Online 2004). Educated Africans bemoan that the reading cultures of the late colonial and early independence period are decaying (Griswold 2000). Such worries, regardless of their basis in reality, suggest the value accorded to the practice of reading.

In the United States, the impact of race and ethnicity on reading is striking and troubling. To cite just one of many studies, the 2004 National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) survey found that 26% of Hispanics, 37% of African Americans, and 51% of white Americans read literature. This pattern holds for every educational and income level and every age. Women read more than men in each race/ethnicity category. White women have by far the highest reading rate (61%), followed by white men and African American women (41% and 43%, respectively). Hispanic (18%) and African American (30%) men read the least (NEA 2004, table 9, p. 11). The NEA study confirms earlier work that suggested that African Americans and Hispanics read less regardless of income or education (DiMaggio & Ostrower 1992). The recent growth of African American “chick-lit” suggests that black women’s reading may move closer to that of white women (Lee 2004).

Reading starts early. Two thirds of Americans report that they started reading by age seven (Gallup Org. 1990, question 42). Parents read to their children even during their first year of life; most have started this reading by the time their child is three, and often continue (or even begin) during the years when the children can read by themselves (Gallup Org. 1990, questions 44, 48).

A national survey of children’s media use conducted by Roberts and the Kaiser Family Foundation looked at the media habits of 1090 young (2–7) children and 2014 older (8–18) children (Roberts & Foehr 2004). They found that children averaged 45 minutes per day in recreational reading, which included being read

to for the younger group. Most kids—between 80% and 90%—read at least some every day, and a good percentage (49% for 2- to 7-year-olds and 42% for 8- to 18-year-olds) read more than 30 minutes each day. Recreational reading drops in the late teenage years (ages 15–18) down to 34%. But by ages 15–18, more than half of kids are looking at a newspaper for at least 5 minutes, and a comparison with past research shows that “the proportion of U.S. children and adolescents who do so [read newspapers] has remained fairly constant over the past 50 years” (Roberts & Foehr 2004, p. 99). Overall reading time declines with age, and this decline is entirely due to a drop in reading books.

As youngsters move from elementary school into middle and high school, they are typically asked to engage in a good deal more school-related reading than was formerly the case, a factor that probably reduces both desire and time to read outside school. In addition, during late adolescence, myriad additional activities vie for young people’s time—sports, extracurricular activities, social events, earning a diver’s license, part-time jobs, dating. . . . As seems to be the case for noninteractive screen media then, leisure time print exposure is also related to available time, and available time is related to age (Roberts & Foehr 2004, pp. 100–1).

They note that it makes sense that books, which require a relatively large commitment of time, would be affected more than magazines or newspapers (which actually increase).

A strong association exists between parents’ education and their children’s print exposure. Taking all ages together, Roberts & Foehr (2004) find that “statistically significant differences related to education emerge for each of the three individual print media. Youths whose parents completed no more than high school spend less time with all print, particularly books” (p. 103). Figure 1 shows that the primary difference in print exposure is between children whose parents have a high school education or less and children whose parents have at least some college education.

Roberts & Foehr (2004) conclude that both physical and social environments are related to youth reading, with the social environment being the more powerful. The physical environment includes access (printed materials in home, magazine subscriptions) and income. The social environment includes parents’ education (most important) and television orientation (negative relation to print use). “Finally, in spite of claims to the contrary . . . there is little evidence that young people’s leisure reading has changed much over the past half-century. . . . If anything, the averages we found are a bit higher than those that seem to have held for some time. Perhaps the increasing number of magazines aimed at children and adolescents and such children’s book phenomena as the recent Harry Potter craze may be helping reading gain a bit” (Roberts & Foehr 2004, p. 112).

The same seems to be the case in England. A 1994 survey of 8000 English children ages 10, 12, and 14 found that since 1971, reading for most categories of children had either increased or remained steady (Hall & Coles 1999).

They found that the children's attitude toward reading was positive, and most reported themselves to be good readers. Two thirds of the sample reported doing some reading the previous evening. As in the United States there was a relationship between socioeconomic background and number of books read; more advantaged kids read more.

If they receive the same education (which is often not the case, especially in many African and Muslim countries), girls read more and better than boys. This gender advantage seems to be true universally. Research comparing children's reading in 32 countries shows girls to be consistently ahead of boys in their reading abilities (Wagemaker 1996, table 7, p. 34). A survey of British children shows gender differences appear very early. When the survey asked, "How often do you read story books?" to very young children (ages 4–7), 67.6% of girls but only 55.5% of boys responded "very often" or "often"; by ages 7–11 the responses had gone up for both sexes, with 80.5% girls and 68.6% boys claiming to read often or very often (Children's Lit. Res. Cent. 1996, p. 60). Reading by both sexes declined in the early teenage years, but the decline in boys' reading was sharper as they moved into adolescence. When 11- to 13-year-old children were asked, "How often do you read fiction?" 65.8% of girls and 52.6% of boys reported often or very often; by ages 14–16, the girls had dropped to 56.5% and the boys to 38.6%. Another survey of English children suggests that reading increased significantly for all 10-year-olds and for 12-year-old girls between 1971 and 1994, whereas reading for 14-year-old boys had decreased significantly (Hall & Coles 1999).

Alarming reports suggest, however, that reading may be in decline. Although this has been a concern for decades, a recent study commissioned by the NEA that compared reading in 1982, 1992, and 2002 shows a steady decline in reading, especially the reading of literature and especially among young adults (NEA 2004; for earlier evidence of the small proportion of readers who do "literary reading"—poetry, drama, serious fiction—see Zill & Winglee 1990).

A comparable long-term study in the Netherlands paints a similar picture (Knulst & Kraaykamp 1997, 1998). Survey data in that country over four decades (1955–1995) shows a steady decline in leisure reading, contrary to expectations of those who predicted reading would go up with increased education. While the percentage of Dutch who read books during the week declined, "the people who did read newspapers and books in 1995 . . . 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" (Knulst & Kraaycamp 1997, p. 137). The same concentration effect is found in the NEA study: Heavy readers read as much or more than ever, but more casual reading has declined.

The Dutch study suggests that heavy readers are aging and not being replaced. Younger cohorts (post–World War II) read less at all ages; moreover, they do not read more as they grow older the way previous cohorts did. Knulst & Kraaycamp (1997, 1998) see television as the major reason (their study ended in 1995, before the Internet had become ubiquitous). All groups, regardless of education, have seen

an increase in television viewing and a decrease in reading. There is a generation gap—older, highly educated people hang on to the reading habit, but younger ones do not. Now the group of heavy readers “largely consists of people with an intermediate and higher degree of education from the pre-war cohorts.” Educated people still do the most reading, but in younger cohorts the reading of the highly educated has declined much the same as that of their less-educated peers.

HOW DO WE READ?

“How do we read?” can be a cognitive question: How do people learn to decode written texts? But it has become a sociological question as well: Under what circumstances and on what occasions do people who can read actually do so? Reading research has proceeded along these two paths. The more established tradition, rooted in cognitive psychology, assumes reading to be a “universally similar psychological process that exists within the minds of individual people” (Cherland 1994, p. 5). A newer line of work, rooted in anthropology and sociolinguistics, sees reading as “an external, social act, performed by people in interaction and in a particular context” (Cherland 1994, p. 5). Of course, literacy is neither only a set of mental skills nor only a social performance. It is “a concept that embraces the cultural resources of a literate tradition—including the writing system(s) of this tradition—and the ensemble of abilities necessary to exploit these cultural resources. . . . Literacy is a form of cultural organization itself, what we may call ‘societal literacy’ ” (Brockmeier et al. 2002, p. 11; see also Wagner et al. 1999, especially essays by Finnegan and Heath).

A review of the societal literacy research suggests that two answers to the “How do we read?” question have emerged to challenge the customary view that reading is the act of an individual sitting down and reading a book. First is the practice thesis: Reading is a social practice, and people read all the time as an unnoticed part of their everyday pursuits, in addition to their more formal occasions of sitting down and reading. Second is the collective thesis: People read in groups, and even individual reading is the result of collective memberships.

Practice

The emphasis on practice, reading as it is actually done, has largely displaced the old dualisms of literate/illiterate, oral/literate, reading/writing, and reading/misreading. Contemporary researchers are more apt to envision reading as a network of practices, one that is unstable and contingent upon shifting contexts (Fernandez 2001).

The point about contexts is more complicated than it first appears. Contexts first and foremost involve the material and institutional circumstances of reading: whether people are literate; whether they have access to print materials, free time, and sufficient light; whether they read for school, work, or leisure; whether their buses are comfortable or packed; whether the electricity is reliable (Griswold

2000). The idea of context has expanded beyond such conditions to include the geopolitical context [Angelescu & Poulain (2001) show the impact of the cold war on reading], the gender context (Barton & Hamilton 1998, chapter 10; Cherland 1994; Currie 1999; Roberts & Foehr 2004; and many others have shown how reading both conforms to and reproduces gender), and even the literacy context itself.

On this last point, Brandt (2001) compared the reading practices of a great-grandmother, Genna (born in 1898), and her great-grandson, Michael (born in 1981):

In the sparse setting of Genna May's prairie farmhouse, paper, hard to come by, was reserved for her father's church work [she used a slate]. In Michael May's print-clutter suburban ranch home, his parents introduced him to writing and reading amid the background chatter of network television. For members of the community in which Genna May grew up, the ability to write the words of everyday life often marked the end of formal schooling, whereas for Michael May, these same experiences served as a preparation for kindergarten (Brandt 2001, p. 74).

Genna and her great-grandson both acquired literacy but in radically different literacy contexts, so their similar reading skills meant very different things. "If Genna carved out a turn-of-the-century literacy amid a scarcity of print, her great-grandson must carve one out amid a material and ideological surplus" (p. 74). Genna's reading was a ticket to upward social mobility, whereas so far Michael's reading is merely an indication of normal development.

Barton & Hamilton (1998, p. 7) identified six aspects of the practice model:

- Literacy is a set of social practices, which can be inferred from events mediated by written texts.
- Different literacies are associated with different domains of life.
- Social institutions and power relationships pattern literacy practices, with some literacies becoming more dominant, visible, and influential.
- Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices.
- Literacy is historically situated.
- Literacy practices change, and new ones are frequently acquired through informal learning and sense making.

In a rich demonstration of the practice approach, Barton & Hamilton (1998) studied everyday literacy practices—both reading and writing—in Lancaster, England. In addition to general ethnographic observations, they offer a close look at the literacy practices of four individuals. For example, Harry is a retired fireman and veteran who reads a lot, especially newspapers (which he discusses over weekly tea with an old friend) and histories of World War II. Scorning novels, he wants "the real authentic thing," e.g., authentic war accounts. Harry uses literacy to make sense of his own life. Others use literacy for community activism, for household

accounts, for writing fan letters. Barton & Hamilton (1998) stress the enormous “diversity of literacies” in people’s private lives. Literacy practices include two kinds of reading, one in which reading is the main goal of the activity and the other in which reading is a means to another end, as well as several kinds of writing. Overall, Barton & Hamilton find people use their repertoire of literacy practices to organize their lives, communicate, entertain themselves, document their experiences, make sense of their worlds, and participate in social life beyond the immediate household. Not all of these activities are directly social, but some are. This social dimension of the practice approach is stressed in our second line of research.

Groups

Since the burst of production-of-culture studies in the late 1970s and 1980s, sociologists have successfully established the collective nature of literary and artistic production, as in Howard Becker’s oft-cited example of how Trollope’s coffee-pouring servant was essential to his vast literary output (Becker 1982). But if the collective nature of authorship has become a commonplace, the collective nature of readership is less obvious. Most people still envision readers like Jo in *Little Women*, sitting alone by the window, munching apples.

Long (2003) points out that the “ideology of the solitary reader” ignores the social infrastructure of reading itself: Books are social products, but reading must also be taught; gatekeepers, such as Oprah Winfrey or the *New York Times Book Review*, steer reading choices; and for many people the reading experience is intrinsically social. The case of Harry regularly discussing his reading with an old crony is very typical. Perhaps the ultimate expression of this form of social literacy is the contemporary book club or reading group; the two terms, used interchangeably, refer to a group of people who meet on regular basis in their leisure time to discuss books (Hartley 2001).

Two recent studies of reading groups show how these rapidly increasing clubs structure reading and its satisfactions. Long (2003) confined her study to women’s groups, all in Houston. She focused on four groups in particular; overall she identified 121 groups in the city, of which 64% were all female, 3% were male, and 33% had members of both sexes. The women’s groups followed a long tradition stemming from the nineteenth century women’s club movement. Long’s survey of contemporary groups suggests that book clubs attract highly educated members who tend to be affluent, stable, and traditional in terms of marriage and religion. Most groups grew out of neighborhoods or circles of acquaintances, but prior connections are not always necessary, e.g., some came from bookstore notices. Members claim their reading groups satisfy their needs for intellectual stimulation; housewives with young children were a typical example, and another club was made up of women working in technical, male-dominated fields who wanted to have intelligent conversation with other women.

In the United Kingdom, Hartley (2001) surveyed 350 reading groups. She found a sex ratio comparable to that found by Long: 69% of groups were all female, 4%

all male (including some of the oldest and most formal groups), and the rest were mixed. Although reading in groups is not new, she notes their enormous growth in the late 1990s. (Internet reading groups are both new and legion, but are not included in either Hartley's or Long's studies.) She notes how reading groups do not necessarily compete with but are sometimes facilitated by mass media, such as Oprah's Book Club beginning in 1996 (each month television personality Oprah Winfrey announces her choice of a book, and a month later devotes half her show to discussing it). Face-to-face groups have been organized by public libraries, bookstores, newspapers, a telecommunications company in the United Kingdom, the magazine *Good Housekeeping*, and entire cities, as in Chicago's "One Book, One Chicago" program.

Cities' and celebrities' sponsorship of the public's engagement with books reminds us of the extraordinary value that society attributes to reading. It is hard to imagine another medium being promoted so aggressively. The almost unquestioned assumption seems to be that reading and talking about reading is a social good. Historian Harvey Graff (1987) has worked to debunk the "literacy myth" that links literacy, schooling, modernization, democracy, and individual social mobility, but such critical voices have had little impact on the public or its institutions. Regardless of whether people are actually spending much time reading, they honor and encourage it to a remarkable extent.

READING AND OTHER MEDIA

In their magisterial *History of Reading in the West*, Cavallo & Chartier (1999) argue that authors do not write books; they produce texts—written objects—that readers handle in different ways. This practice-oriented approach to reading has changed the way we think about the relationship between reading and other media use. Instead of dividing time into a pie chart—a fat slice to watching television, a thin slice to reading—scholars think of media as interwoven with one another and within the context of living our lives.

In this section we first look at traditional media, i.e., before the Internet era began in about the mid-1990s. These media are still around and indeed occupy the bulk of most people's media use. Downloading music is popular, in other words, but most people have the radio on. We then look at the emerging picture of how the Internet is affecting reading.

The Gallup Organization asked people how much time they had spent "yesterday" using different types of media (Gallup Org. 1990). Such a question in the past would have been seen as pieces of a pie: e.g., people spend more time listening to the radio than they do reading newspapers. But of course thinking about practice reminds us that people listen to the radio while they read the newspaper, so to compare media uses this way is misleading. Instead, we look for patterns.

The first thing to notice is that some media are omnipresent, woven into the fabric of everyday life, while others are not (Figure 2). Most people spend at least

some time every day listening to the radio, watching television, and reading a newspaper. On the other hand, most people spend no time at all reading magazines or books. So we can think of media in two clusters, one that people cannot or do not avoid and one that they can and do avoid. Reading is the latter: Most people most days do not read anything but the paper.

If we look at media users only, as Figure 3 shows, we see that people spend a little time with newspapers and a lot of time with television. Few people spend more than an hour with newspapers and magazines, and few people spend less than an hour with television and radio. Books occupy less time overall, and unlike television and newspapers, there is a fairly wide range of time spent reading; about the same percentage of people (5%–10%) spend a half hour, an hour, or two hours with books. It is also notable that reading for work/school and reading for pleasure occupy about the same amount of time: up to two hours. In the higher time categories they diverge; some people (e.g., students) spend four hours or more reading books for work, but almost no one spends that kind of time in leisure reading.

The same survey tried to explain why people use media. The survey identified relaxation as one reason, and respondents find books and television equally relaxing. A second reason is to do their jobs; more than 60% of employed respondents see reading speed or comprehension as being very important to their work, so the routine practice of reading is essential to many people who are not readers in the sense of being deeply engaged with books. A third reason people use media is to learn. For this purpose, people see a big difference between reading and watching television: 60% of people think books are the better way to learn, whereas 30% think television is better. Interestingly, people also report that reading books is “more rewarding” than watching television by a similar 2:1 ratio. Again we see the high esteem that people accord to books regardless of whether they actually read them.

The inverse relationship between reading and television has been a constant finding since the 1950s. For example, the General Social Survey on media use found that older kids (11–14 and 15–18) who live in households where the television is constantly on or who have televisions in their bedrooms spend significantly less time reading, especially reading books, than others (Roberts & Foehr 2004). This effect of constantly available television remains true even controlling for parents’ education (Roberts & Foehr 2004). It seems beyond question that television watching has a negative impact on reading. But what about new media?

At the dawn of the Internet age, Birkerts (1994), among others, sounded the death knell of reading:

Over the past few decades, in the blink of the eye of history, our culture has begun to go through what promises to be a total metamorphosis. The influx of electronic communications and information processing technologies, abetted by the steady improvement of the microprocessor, has rapidly brought on a condition of critical mass. Suddenly it feels like everything is poised for change; the slower world that many of us grew up with dwindles in the rearview

mirror. The stable hierarchies of the printed page—one of the defining norms of that world—are being superseded by the rush of impulses through freshly minted circuits. The displacement of the page by the screen is not yet total. . . — it may never be total—but the large-scale tendency in that direction has to be obvious to anyone who looks (Birkerts 1994, p. 3).

Obvious or not, the picture is less clear than Birkerts expected. In the first place, technology and books have always been mutually supportive, and this symbiosis goes well beyond the revolutionary impact of printing (Eisenstein 1979). Reading surged when middle-class people became able to afford windows in the eighteenth century (Watt 1957). It surged again in the nineteenth century when railroads gave people periods of idle time (Altick 1957). The late twentieth century held high hopes, yet unrealized, for e-books. Twenty-first century entrepreneurs seek patents for Super Slurper, a compound that can dry books caught up in floods more quickly than previous methods (Knapp 2003).

More specifically, unlike the case of television, the Internet does not seem to be displacing reading. A poll in 2001 shows that Internet users spent exactly the same amount of time reading as people who never used computers at all (NEA 2004, p. 14). A review of the available research suggests that the relationship between reading and going online is not zero-sum but more-more. Holding education constant (both reading and Internet use are strongly associated with education), it appears that the heaviest Internet users are also the heaviest readers (Griswold & Wright 2004). Similar findings appear in the articles collected in *IT & Society* (Robinson 2002): Whereas one article in this collection (Nie) finds that Internet use depresses reading, the others find either no effect (Robinson, Kestnbaum, Neustadt & Alvarez) or a positive effect (Fu, Wang & Qiu; De Haan & Huysmans).

There are at least two reasons why this might be the case. One is the direct effect: The Internet supports reading and vice versa. Amazon.com, which was first and foremost a bookseller, was the first e-business that many consumers encountered and remains a giant in the book trade, as does its online rival barnesandnoble.com. People tell each other about books in their email. They participate in the Internet book groups that Hartley (2001) found to be proliferating, and they chat in groups devoted to particular authors and genres. And of course people read online constantly, although usually they do not count this as reading. Meanwhile, books and magazines like *Wired* that are devoted to the Internet multiply.

The second reason for the enhancing effect of the Internet on reading is that, as is true for virtually all forms of cultural participation, some people simply do more things than other people do. Those whom Richard Peterson has called “cultural omnivores” do more of everything—attend live performances, listen to music, attend or participate in sports, visit museums—except watch television (Peterson & Kern 1996). Cultural omnivores, who tend to be educated and middle-class, maintain a diverse portfolio of cultural capital (Erickson 1996). They eagerly add the Internet to their other pursuits. The NEA study shows the same: “Literary readers” attend museums and arts performances more than other people of the same education level and social class (NEA 2004).

Other media support reading to a considerable extent. The impact of Oprah Winfrey is the best example, but books and authors appear on talk shows, on cable channels, on radio interviews, and in other print media—consider the multiplying effect of something like the *Times Literary Supplement* or *New York Review of Books*. So the imagery of dividing up a pie does not correspond to people's actual practices.

And yet, even cultural omnivores have limits to their time and energy. Although the evidence is mixed, surveys like that of the NEA suggest a decline in at least some of the time people spend reading in the late twentieth century. The new media, including not just the Internet but also various electronic forms of entertainment, are plausible competitors for time and attention. The NEA study, although it did not directly ask if people substituted Internet surfing for reading, notes that the major drop in literary reading occurred in the 1990s, the same time when large numbers of people were discovering the Internet.

One can reconcile the evidence that Internet use does not depress reading with the evidence that reading is declining overall. Perhaps an elite segment of the general population—highly educated, affluent, metropolitan—has produced both heavy readers and early adopters of the Internet. As Internet use moves into less-advantaged segments of the population, the picture may change. For these groups, it may be that leisure time is more limited, the reading habit is less firmly established, and the competition between going online and reading is more intense.

THE READING CLASS

Reading has always been associated with education and more generally with urban social elites. Although contemporary commentators deplore the decline of “the reading habit” or “literary reading,” historically the era of mass reading, which lasted from the mid-nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century in northwestern Europe and North America, was the anomaly. We are now seeing such reading return to its former social base: a self-perpetuating minority that we shall call the reading class.

Whereas nineteenth- and twentieth-century stratification involved what people read (e.g., the classical canon versus working-class newspapers or confession magazines), the new century may resemble earlier eras when a fundamental difference was between who read and who did not. Unlike in the past, most people in the developed world will be capable of reading, and will in fact read as part of their jobs, online activities, and the daily business of living. Only a minority, however, will read books on a regular basis; as Figure 2 shows, books are less omnipresent in people's lives than are other media. An open question for sociologists is whether book readers—the reading class—have both power and prestige associated with an increasingly rare form of cultural capital, or whether the reading class will be just another taste culture pursuing an increasingly arcane hobby.

Discussions of the future of reading formerly revolved around either the education system or the competition from other forms of entertainment. The newer emphasis on reading as it is actually practiced, which has been the primary focus of the present essay, has contributed insights along several dimensions.

One is the sheer prestige of reading. Among the Lancaster residents they studied, Barton & Hamilton (1998) found that the idea of being a reader was imbued with values. Reading was seen as a good thing, and people equated reading with being bright. Earlier British working-class attitudes that had judged readers to be lazy or antisocial had faded. Being a reader meant reading books; just reading magazines or newspapers did not count (Barton & Hamilton 1998, p. 158).

Such prestige has been subject to radical critique: Literacy is strongly associated with social inequality. Indeed, Stuckey (1991) argues that books and the teaching of literacy commit "social violence." In the classic Marxian view, class results from an unfair system of ownership.

It is possible that a system of ownership built on the ownership of literacy is more violent than past systems, however. Though it seems difficult to surpass the violence of systems of indenture, slavery, industrialism, and the exploitation of immigrant or migrant labor, literacy provides a unique bottleneck. Unlike a gun . . . literacy legitimates itself (Stuckey 1991, p. 18).

Such critiques have had virtually no impact on the social honor accorded to reading and to "being a reader."

The second sociological emphasis is on reading as a product of social organization. An immense infrastructure supports the reading habit. Although education is the most obvious, as are the media tie-ins mentioned above, there exist more specific institutional and corporate forms that encourage and sustain reading. Consider the reading group phenomenon. The United States has the most, with groups going back to nineteenth century women's clubs (Hartley 2001, Long 2003). In the United States (and to a much lesser extent in other book club countries like the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand), there are paid group leaders, book-club consultants, coordinators, books on how to organize a book club, reading group questions in the back of paperback editions—a considerable "book club service industry" (Hartley 2001, p. 118). We might call this the pile-on effect: Reading practices, once they reach some critical mass, generate their own support structure.

The third insight, a product of the first two, is the division between reading as a matter-of-fact practice of just about everyone and the reading of literature, serious nonfiction, and the quality press as an esteemed, cultivated, supported practice of an educated elite. The gap between these two literacies seems likely to widen. The reading class will flourish even if overall reading by the general public declines. An open question for sociologists is whether there exists a relationship between this emerging divide on the one hand and other forms of stratification and inequality on the other.

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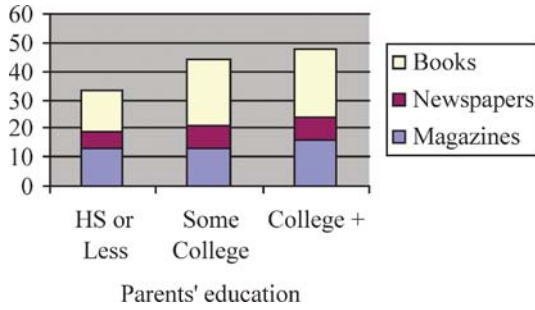


Figure 1 Daily reading by parental education.

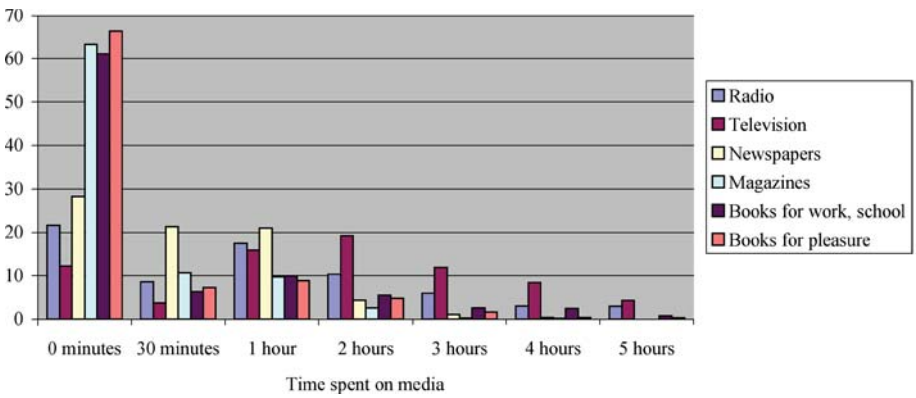


Figure 2 Average daily media use.

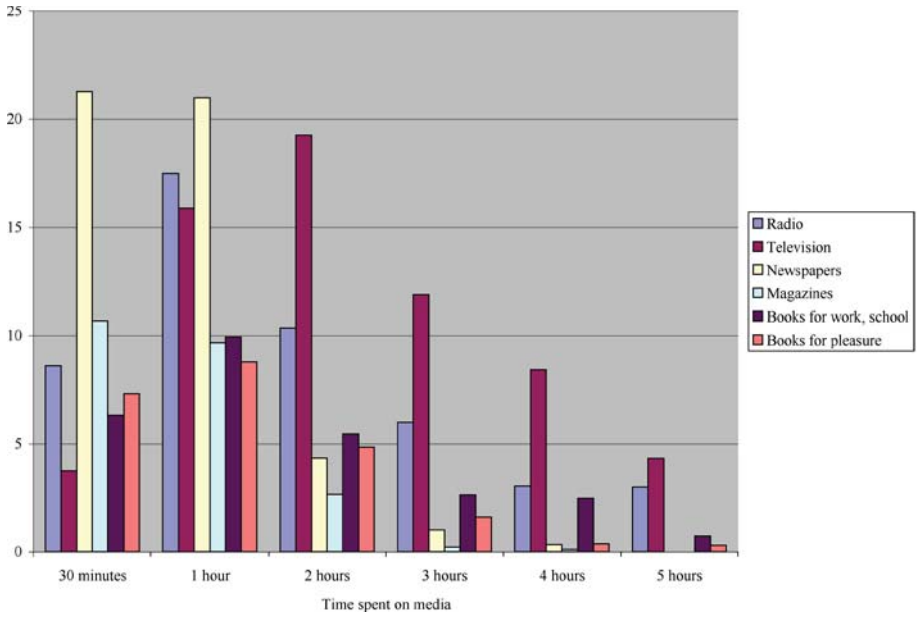


Figure 3 Media use previous day, users only.



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ERRATA

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