Research in Mass Communication

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The library is certainly not a mass agency in the sense that the term is commonly used. Why then should the librarian be encouraged to engage in research in the field of mass communication? The answer can perhaps best be seen if we look at a typical mass communication situation and try to define the library's role in it.

Let us suppose that the government wants the public to realize how important it is to take the Salk polio shots. A scholarly report on the subject could be issued by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare which would describe in detail the way in which the vaccine works to protect against infantile paralysis. The difficult style in which such a report is likely to be written would place definite limits on the effectiveness of such a report; most audiences would not be able to understand the medical jargon. The Department could consequently commission a feature writer to do an appropriate article for a magazine at the level of Harper's or Atlantic, and could also issue a "popular" version of the report for publication in the magazine section of a Sunday newspaper. To reach non-readers a television program on the subject could be written and spot announcements could be worked out for radio presentation. Each of these several versions would reach only a part of the total audience which the Department wishes to reach; and all of them will have to be used if everyone who should get the message is to have an equal chance to do so.

In this hypothetical situation most of the problems of mass communication are illustrated. If a larger and more heterogeneous audience is to be reached more channels and approaches will have to be employed, even when the message is not so serious or important. Now, the library is one of the more important agencies through which such messages are distributed, but in the example above, it will carry only one or two of the versions of the message which the Department wishes to disseminate. And these are likely to be the versions which will be used by the smallest of the several potential audiences. The implica-

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tions of this situation for the effectiveness of the library as a social agency (What kinds of material should the library handle? What are the size and composition of its public? What is the value of the information it disseminates? Can other agencies do the job better?) constitute the problems of communication research which the librarian could properly investigate.

To keep this chapter within manageable bounds we shall be concerned here primarily with research problems having to do with the mass media. The media, as the term is used here, refers to the mechanisms of impersonal reproduction which intervene between the speaker (or writer or artist) and his audience. The mass media are those "instruments of communication which can convey identical messages to large numbers of persons who are often physically separated." 1 Such a limitation rules out face-to-face communication, which may be one of the most important aspects of all. But it includes motion pictures, radio, television, and the several materials of print, which are the media through which the individual or group with a message to convey can reach vast audiences impersonally and simultaneously.

Our interest in this chapter will be devoted to needed studies in the "sociology" of communication rather than in its technology. Problems of electronics and of technique, for example, will not be considered here. This is not to deny that it is important for the librarian to understand the genesis and the manufacture of the tools he uses, nor does it imply that skill in using them is unnecessary. But since research is our concern here, it seems useful to confine our attention to the areas where research by the librarian (not only in the academic laboratory but also in the field itself) can most fruitfully make a contribution. Ideally, of course, the librarian should know something about the organizational structure of the communication industry, the mechanical operations of the major media, and the arts of writing, speaking, play production, script writing, film editing, etc., which are necessary to using the channels of communication. Newly added to this list of skills is that of encoding for machines of information storage and retrieval—an aspect of the impact of the communications revolution upon the librarian which will be dealt with in the chapter on documentation. In most of these cases, however, other fields provide the facilities, the single-minded concentration, and the tradition of existing research in these areas with which librarianship cannot compete. Our unique strength lies in our ability to deal with the social impact of the several media, for it is with this that librarians are really concerned, whether they have always recognized it or not.

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For the kinds of problems which the library is best fitted to study two major approaches are probably most useful: content analysis and audience research. This will not be the kind of audience research to which the communication industry has so assiduously devoted its energies. The statistics about audiences have been, and continue to be, compiled in great detail by those who control the major media, and need not occupy much of the librarians' time. Actually, most of the original work of counting noses was done by the librarians about twenty to twenty-five years ago, and the patterns they discovered have been altered almost not at all by any of the subsequent large-scale censuses and polls. ² Much of this pioneering in audience measurement merely utilized the records normally kept by librarians as part of their daily routine, and we can still, without too much difficulty, keep tab on the total number of books we circulate, the total number of people who took them out, the total number of people who ask reference questions, or listen to recordings, or read magazines and newspapers within the library itself. Outside the library the other agencies keep similar statistics, and the number of television sets in operation, the number of theatre tickets sold, the ratings of audience attention to individual radio shows, the circulation of magazines, and the number of books published and purchased can be discovered with comparatively little effort.

But the gathering of statistics is only the beginning of the kind of audience research in which we are interested. We want studies which will tell us not just about the size of the audience, but about its reactions. This is the sociological and psychological side of audience research; research which will need to use a great number of disciplines: psychology, education, economics, human behavior, the several arts, and many more. We shall be turning our attention to the individual reader-listener-spectator rather than the statistical mode; and we shall be concentrating on the content of the media, rather than on their technology. Statistics are important, of course, because we shall be interested to know how representative our individual is; and in some cases there are still some basic over-all figures which need to be gathered before we start to study the sub-samples. Technology, too, will be important to us on occasion because it imposes restrictions upon content. To the extent that they throw this kind of light on our problems of the sociology of communication, we shall have to take cognizance of quantitative methods and technological development. But mainly we shall be concerned with a kind of psychological probing which will use the insights that come from our years of working with
books and the people who read them. For it is here that the librarian has a special knowledge which no other group of investigators has.

The analysis of content is carried on by librarians every day, in almost every aspect of their professional work. Book selection, the evaluation of reference tools, descriptive cataloging, classification, the writing of annotations for reader guidance, the selection of newspapers for clipping—all of these and many more standard library procedures are based on a more or less intensive analysis of the content of library materials. Yet content analysis as a research technique is seldom used by librarians, although it could provide valuable information about some of our most pressing problems.

What content analysis provides as a method is the objective, systematic, and quantitative discipline which is missing from the impressionistic surveys typical of daily practice. Most of our reviews, annotations, and impressions do not provide the kinds of solid descriptive data available from content analysis. If we had such accurate and detailed information we could begin to establish generalizations about the content that would be more broadly useful.

The resistance of librarians to the quantitative aspects of content analysis is understandable, and certainly it is true that some of the content studies in the past have been unimaginative tallies of numbers. But this results from a misuse of the technique; it is not inherent in the technique itself. On the other hand, some frequency counts can be very revealing in themselves, although usually as the materials grow more subtle and "literary," the less useful a purely quantitative analysis will be. The informed analyst knows this, and makes adjustments accordingly. No research method can be used as a substitute for judgment and insight; it is employed to provide the necessary data, interpretation of which will call judgment and insight into play.

A few content analysis studies now exist which illustrate some of the useful descriptive tasks to which the technique can be applied. Many more are needed which will describe more accurately the state of the literature in many subject fields. Over a period of time what trends can be traced in the way that different subjects are treated in the several media? What changes have occurred in the presentation of minority groups, or labor problems, or international affairs, or the role of science in society (the possibilities are endless) in books, magazines, newspapers and on the screen, the air, and the television tube? This can be of very great value to the librarian in many ways; for example, an accurate description of the changing boundaries between the sciences (chemistry and biology, for instance) could help deter-
mine appropriate departmentation in a library, with implications for book buying, building plans, subject specialization on the staff, etc.

International comparisons, rather than time comparisons, might also prove enlightening. How does the treatment of a given topic in the foreign press compare with that in the American press? What problems are emphasized in the books of another country as compared with those issuing from our own presses? What proportion of foreign publication is translated into English, what particular fields and viewpoints find their way into reading to which Americans have ready access? What areas are being lost to the American reading public if publications from other countries are not included in our collections? And what impressions do other countries have of America, if they do not have access to our publications?

Comparisons between the several media can be made in the same way. What subject areas are treated adequately only in books or other printed media? What subjects are treated in other media which print does not cover? Here again there are implications for the library and its collection of materials, once a really sound and dependable description is available.

The comparative analyses of content give promise of providing some of the most valuable information for communication study at present. The comparison of the several media, for example, is particularly pertinent in view of the increasing concern librarians and educators feel about the competition to reading represented by the films, radio, and television. Because of his vested interest in the book, the librarian makes many claims for the superiority of the book over the other media in terms of depth of analysis, subtlety of interpretation, scope of coverage and other aspects which seem to be important. How much do we really know about this? Can we compare the content of a book about orchestral conducting with the Omnibus program on television in which Leonard Bernstein discussed the topic? A description of the content of the two would have to take into account supplementary visual and musical content—and the personality of Bernstein himself—which no book could contain. Does the book have other, equally important things to offer?

If the librarian is to continue to promote the book rather than other media, he should be able to say what the advantages and values of the book are. His choice should be based on a sound judgment concerning comparative effectiveness. And this he can make only when he has the data from a good comparative content analysis.

Equally promising as an area for research is the comparative con-
tent analysis within a single medium. This is particularly applicable in the field of print where the range of appeals can be so wide and the number of different audiences to be reached can be so diversified. A long-standing problem for public librarians, for instance, has been that of finding good "readable" materials on subjects of significance to the adult reader with limited reading ability. To meet this need, readability formulas have been devised, popularizations have been written, digests have increased, and a welter of other attempts to reach the reader at his own level have been introduced. In the example of the Salk polio shots information cited above, we have seen how this drive towards popularization operates. The big question for the librarian has to do with the accuracy, completeness, authenticity, and reliability of the materials in the popularizations. What content is lost when a ten-page article becomes a three-page digest? Are ideas necessarily watered-down or distorted because specialist jargon is translated into the vernacular? Can difficult concepts be presented in language which is not difficult, without misrepresenting the full complexity of the concept? These are questions which should be answered by the librarian whenever he selects a popularization for his collection, and whenever he recommends it to a patron. Comparative content analysis is the only method available to us to pin down precisely what is retained and what is lost; what is altered and what is kept intact between the original scholarly presentation and the popular one. If enough such studies were made, it might well be possible to establish a set of criteria concerning popularizations which could be used as a guide in the evaluation and selection of such materials for different libraries and different patrons.

There is a final, peripheral value in the use of content analysis by the librarian. This is its "disciplinary" benefit, which forces the librarian "inside" the content in a way that his usual reading and his usual impressionistic analysis do not. The frequency-count, mundane as it may appear, often opens up new aspects of a book even to the habitual book reader. The comparative analysis of one book with another soon reveals recurring patterns which a single reading would not uncover. And this provides a better insight into the cumulative effects of reading about which we know little today, but about which we will have to learn a great deal if ever we are to deal accurately with reading effects. Content analysis therefore is not only useful as a research method for adding to the general sum of factual knowledge; it can also be of value to the individual librarian by giving additional dimensions to his own reading experiences.
Content analysis is seldom undertaken for its own sake. Our interest in having a more accurate and reliable description of the content of any piece of communication lies in what that description can reveal, either about the probable intent of the sender or its possible effect upon the receiver. The intent of the sender is of particular importance where any social responsibility falls upon the disseminator of the message, as it does in the case of the librarian.

It is a point of pride with the American librarian that his library's collection is a balanced one. This is not a matter merely of a wide range of subject matter: something on all topics. It is a matter too of a wide range of viewpoints: all sides of each topic, and all facets of controversial issues. The librarian does not attempt to rule out biases per se, but to maintain an equal opportunity for many biases to find expression. Such an ideal requires that the librarian know what his collection contains, and what the biases are. A perfect balance is probably not possible because the available literature and the comparative value of its several parts are not themselves in perfect balance. It may not always even be desirable to maintain a perfect balance: an equal number of books proclaiming that the world is flat to balance the number which claim that the world is round, for example, is not the librarian's ideal. But he should know the nature of the special viewpoints represented on his shelves; he should be able through advice and guidance to help the reader to weigh one side against the other to establish his own particular balance; and certainly he should be proof himself against the emotional rather than the rational presentation. Identification of intent through studies of content can help to give him the knowledge he needs to perform this kind of service.

The basic assumption underlying the use of content analysis to identify the intentions of the communicators is that a definite relationship exists between the characteristics of the communication itself and the characteristics of those who produce it. Generally speaking, most of us probably accept this assumption, but attempts to find data to support it have more often than not proved somewhat less than satisfactory. In certain obvious cases, the connection is quite clear: a headline in the Chicago Tribune proclaims DEWEY WINS! when, as a matter of simple fact, he lost. This tells us a good deal about the bias of the publisher and the extent to which wishful thinking outran the facts in the case. But most content is not so overtly revealing, and it is in these less-than-clear cases that a measurement of intent is most needed.
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The kinds of study which have been most successful to date are those which help to identify the methodology of the propagandist. A. M. Lee's study of the speeches of Father Coughlin45 resulted in the establishment of an inventory of propaganda characteristics in any piece of verbal argument. More studies which would provide similar generalizations applicable to the analysis of writing are needed. Propaganda analysis6 has established itself as an acceptable technique, but the more subtle kinds of special pleading which are not out-and-out propaganda will require much more refined techniques of analysis. The librarian has need of a tool for identifying the intent of the writer when that intent is not proclaimed. Through the analysis of obviously slanted materials he might well be able to create a measuring stick for the discovery of intentional bias in less obvious materials.

Another place where comparative content analysis may be used to reveal intent is in the study of popularizations. The popularization technique automatically imposes selection and restatement upon source materials and may thus cover up under the guise of simplification deliberate distortion of the original. But where the investigator has both the original statement and the revision of it, he can study what kinds of things are omitted, what kinds of things are added, what kinds of restatement occur. These are revealing data for an analyst interested in the probable intent of the communicator. Many studies of this kind are possible; the data lie ready on the libraries' shelves to be mined by the student of communication.

In any study of the communication industry, the concentration of control is also a source of considerable concern. The concern derives from the question whether such concentration actually causes an imbalance in content; that is, whether the point of view of the "ruling" group of producers finds expression to the virtual exclusion of any other points of view. Such a question can be raised only if the basic assumption mentioned at the beginning of this section is accepted: that the characteristics of the producers will color the content they produce. Any student of communication should be interested to discover the extent to which this belief is actually supported in fact: are there groups in our society who have inadequate access to the channels of communication because they are not among those who control the channels? An analysis of content will reveal a great deal about this, and by bringing more graphically to the attention of the librarian the areas in which representation is weak, help him to redress the balance in his own collection by more careful selection. "Who says what to whom" is a major part of any communication study, but the
"who" and the "what" have to be seen in relation to each other if the identification is to be really meaningful.

The identification of the "to whom" is also important for the librarian, and it is here that the techniques of audience research come into play. In a general way, we have a pretty good idea who the reader is. More studies which will merely corroborate this generalized picture are useful on occasion to correct for changes which may have come about through changes in the communication picture itself. The astounding growth of television in this country, for example, has undoubtedly had some effect on the amount of reading, of film going, and of radio listening. Has it changed the characteristics of the reading audience as well? Or are the better educated still probably the ones who read, even though the amount of total reading they do may have been slightly reduced? It might be useful to re-do some of the reading studies of twenty years ago just to be sure.

Much more useful, however, would be more intensive case studies of particular readers—and especially of those who do not fit the pattern already identified as typical. Who are the well-educated, upper-middle-income, professional men who do not read? Who are the readers—every library has many of them—who seem to have none of the characteristics which correlate with reading? An intensive study of the hows and whys in such instances would tell us a great deal more about what leads people to reading, or what deters them from it, than the over-all figures we now have which tell us merely that a person with a college education is more likely, all things being equal, to read more than someone with only a grade school education. What we want now is a study in depth of interests and motivations. This can not be based on a single question in a cross section poll of the entire population which asks, "Why did you read this book?"

We also want studies, equally intensive, of the users of the other media, and most particularly of the book readers who are users of the other media. Television is still new enough, and still growing rapidly enough, to make us want to know something about the extent to which it has cut into reading, and for whom, and for what kinds of content. The library's users are a good segment of the reading public to study in this connection, particularly where records of library use before and after TV purchase can be had. Librarians have reported their impressions about this and readers have been asked to guess about it, and educators have aired their undocumented views. What is needed now is the documentation.

Why do we wonder whether the message has been altered in its
transmission from scholarly to popular presentation? Why are we concerned that children are more readily reached by television than by books? Why do we care whether adults now read digests instead of the complete original work? What difference does it make if the book is neglected by those who have seen the movie? What does it matter that only a small proportion of the total adult public is capable of reading a sustained and detailed analysis of a social problem? In every case our real interest is in the effects of the communications upon the audiences they reach.

Underlying all library activities is the assumption that the library patron is affected by the materials which he obtains through the library. All library book selection, for example, is based on our guesses about effects: we select books which will help our readers to gain information, or entertainment, or aesthetic pleasure, or background knowledge. When we reject, it is again in terms of effects that we do so: the book will not provide sufficient information, recreation or knowledge to warrant the expense; there are other books which carry the same message more effectively; the information contained therein is faulty or distorted and thus will presumably have an undesirable effect upon the user. The librarian’s particular skill is demonstrated by the accuracy with which he can predict the effects which his library materials will produce upon the users of them. And the librarian’s constant battle against censorships is based on his belief that some effects are more important than others, and his disagreement with the censoring groups about the alleged effects to be anticipated.

Yet oddly enough we have almost no really solid information about the effects of reading or of any of the other media of communication. A few small scale studies have been made\textsuperscript{9–11} which demonstrate that some effects can be produced under certain artificial conditions, but no generalizations can be made on the basis of their findings. A few studies in the realm of political behavior have been made\textsuperscript{12–14} which make the first steps toward the more basic understanding of the role of print and other communications in the voters’ decision-making. But the librarian should know a great deal more than he does about the effectiveness of different kinds of printed materials, and of the effectiveness of print as compared to other communication media, and of the audiences who are most and least affected, and by what kinds of content. Here is a fertile field for some case studies of library users.

The study of effects is a complex task, calling upon a great variety of skills and backgrounds. Many studies will have to be undertaken,
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each of which will contribute only a small part of the kind of knowledge we hope to gain about the subject. But many of these parts can logically be undertaken in the library. Through the readers' advisor and other staff members who work directly with patrons, it is possible to learn a great deal about what different people like and do not like, remember and do not remember reading, with whom in their reading they identify and whom they reject. Such information can be extremely revealing yet we have done very little with it. Much of what can be done by the practicing librarian in this area will have to be surface and suggestive rather than intensive and definitive. Nevertheless, he can make an important contribution if he does nothing more than suggest productive hypotheses and identify useful lines for more intensive research. Ideal laboratory situations for such studies exist, in particular, where bibliotherapy experiments are being tried in hospitals and other institutions.

In the discussion of content analysis, reference was made to the comparison of, as an example, the Omnibus program about orchestral conducting, and a book on the same topic. There the emphasis was upon the content per se: what is included and what is omitted. But the comparative "effectiveness" of the two media was inevitably part of the discussion as the logical next step in the investigation. In other words, we move from the content, to the audience reached by the content, and we are concerned with what the audience "gets" from its exposure to each of the media. Clearly a description of the content is not enough in itself if we are interested in audience reaction. An objective description of content does not tell us what will be perceived, for what will be perceived is part of the total personal and social situation and not merely, or even primarily, a matter of content alone. For the individual situation the study of content must be supplemented by personal interview and intensive case study.

Our easy generalizations about the comparative effectiveness of the book and the other media may be quite wrong, particularly for audiences of younger people who have grown up with the newer media rather than with the book. Just as the person capable of critical and analytical reading finds so much more in a book than does the casual reader, so the initiated user of the other media may also be capable of taking more from these media than the book-oriented analyst may anticipate. The generation of television viewers and filmgoers may have developed skills of reading between the lines as it were, of interpreting the conventional symbols of the media, of assimilating more than the surface content. Content analysis supple-
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mented by intensive interviews with the users of the media analyzed may open new possibilities concerning comparative effectiveness which could alter considerably our present book-biased conjectures.

In dealing with the comparative analysis of the several media, there is another problem of effects which is more difficult to investigate, but certainly just as important to face. This is the question of how the use of one medium affects the use of another. The question is being raised constantly by anxious parents and educators as it concerns the relation of TV viewing and book reading (in an earlier day it was film going and book reading). It is a commonly held view that addiction to radio, films, and television in youngsters may lead to mental laziness; that it may affect them like a stimulus which has to be administered in larger and larger quantities to produce the same kick. If this be so, what happens to the ability of the book to reach the child after he has been stuffed with a diet of science fiction, crime stories, and similar television fare? Can Childlife compete with Life? Can Hans Andersen be heard over Alfred Hitchcock? Can a child imagine any Cinderella, or Pinocchio, or Alice in Wonderland other than the one Disney has already supplied, complete in every detail?

While this kind of question has most frequently been raised in the area of the children's reading, the same kind of question applies to adults as well. Does a diet of digests make one incapable of swallowing heavier fare? Does the more-heat-than-light approach to serious problems on the air make the serious analysis of problems too deep for the average TV owner to undertake? Is the purely factual approach to knowledge which underlies the quiz programs destroying the individual's ability to reflect, and therefore his ability to use serious printed matter?

These are extremely important questions, particularly in a democracy where majority opinions can shape public policy. If it can be shown that for some people, oral presentation is more effective than print, and visual presentation more effective than either, the implications are far reaching. They touch every aspect of communication and every corner of society into which some kind of communication reaches.

It can readily be seen therefore that the problems outlined in this chapter are not of concern to the librarian alone. They are problems for all students of society, and many studies seeking data related to the questions raised here will be undertaken by social scientists in the many branches of their discipline. In suggesting that the librarian also attack some of these problems, the present writer is reaffirming his
belief that the library is an important social agency—perhaps one of the most important—in the fields of education and communication.

**RESEARCH ON ADULT READING**

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

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

The earliest studies of the sociology of reading were concerned with the general rather than the specific aspects of the problem. We were interested in gaining some basic knowledge about readers and reading in broad terms, in knowing something about the averages and the norms before turning our attention to the individual and his place in the total picture. Thus we saw the importance of describing the “who”

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in the basic question, but identification of the reader was stated in terms of the characteristics most readily ascertained objectively. We were able to reply in census-like terms to such questions as: How do readers differ from non-readers? What are the characteristics of the persons who read? Who is more likely, in any community, to be the customer of the bookstore, the borrower from the library, the user of the several media of print? Sex, age, education, occupation, and marital status have been the variables most frequently studied—variables which can be identified quickly in a personal interview or checked easily on a questionnaire.

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

The "where" studies have taken a similarly generalized view. Studies of sources have been of two kinds: (1) examination of the "geography" of distribution agencies on a national, regional, and community basis, and (2) investigation of agencies by types—the bookstore, the public library, the newsstand—as general sources of reading materials. As from the studies of the reader, some basic general knowledge has been gained from these scrutinies of sources. We know, with reasonable assurance, that the public library and the bookstore are the two major suppliers of books for adults, and that the way of second importance
in which adult readers get such materials is to borrow from the collections of their friends. Also, we know that the city reader is more likely to have access to the varied stock he wants than is the reader in the rural area, and that almost invariably the person who is well served by one of the agencies will be well served by the others. The studies of specific agencies have dealt mainly with gross figures of use, while those of the "geography" of distribution should be recognized as concerned with potential rather than actual reading, showing what the maximum utilization could be for each type of agency in each kind of community and region, but not whether actual use has been made.

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

But even when the investigator does this, the objective research methods he employs usually keep him from a very deep analysis of content. The most prolific contributions in the content analysis field have been the studies of "readability," of which the works of Rudolf Flesch are perhaps the best known. Such studies are not concerned with the quality of the ideas or information contained in a given piece of writing; they are directed toward an analysis of the ease with which it can be read, quite apart from the value to be gained from such reading. Few would deny the importance of gauging the level of difficulty represented by different kinds of materials; certainly the librarian is well aware of the problem of finding those which deal with adult subject matter in terms which the average adult can understand. But the social role of reading is not adequately defined without some analysis of the value of the reading done and some interest in the effects. And there is a growing suspicion among students that indiscriminate reliance upon readability formulas to guide the writer may well alter the social role of reading in undesirable ways.
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Thus far, in treating the generalized character of the reading studies, we have treated the investigations of the question—Who reads what, and where does he get it, and how does it affect him?—as though they dealt with each aspect separately and in a vacuum. In actuality, even the most coldly objective efforts have attempted to combine the characteristics in meaningful ways. Thus, readers have been identified not only as readers per se, but as borrowers from the library or users of the bookstore (who and where). They have further been examined in terms of materials: What are the characteristics of the borrowers of fiction from libraries as opposed to buyers of fiction from bookstores, or how do library users of fiction differ from library users of nonfiction (who + where + what)? Such a combination of factors leads to a concern with reading interests and motivations: What do different people want to read about, and why?

Again, the early studies of interests were made in general terms; D. Waples and R. W. Tyler 32 deliberately addressed themselves to group characteristics, and established a strong correlation between them and stated reading interests. They found that the more characteristics that two or more groups held in common (for example, age, sex, occupation, and education) the more likely they were to check similar reading interests on a list of possible magazine articles. But once this was established, a new question arose: Do people actually read what they say they are interested in reading? Waples 33 and Leon Carnovsky 34 combined the analysis of the checklist of interests with a report on actual reading and found that subject interest in itself is not enough; that people read in line with their stated interests only when the material is readily accessible and easy to read. The old assumption, basic to most studies of reading interests and preferences, that what people read is a key to the subjects in which they are interested, seems pretty effectively disproved. Accessibility, then readability, and only then, interest, are the factors which lead people to read the specific things they do.

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

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

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

He knows even less, of course, about results. Occasional mention is made in biographies and autobiographies of the life-changing factors in a book, but these are more interesting than convincing. Few of us can cite an instance in our own experience when a single reading caused a sudden and decisive turn of mind, and the question arises whether such an influence was ever actually felt in that way, or whether it merely makes a striking story. A superficial analysis of one's own reading behavior leads to the hypothesis that effects are cumulative; that no one occurrence but a lifetime of reading forms the opinions and attitudes that we possess; and that the dramatic moment of change and revelation comes because we have been building up to it through all the exposure to ideas in books and other media which have preceded the specific reading. The results are not denied, but the pinpointing of the moment at which an effect appeared is difficult.

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

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

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

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

References


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ADDITIONAL REFERENCES


