



Research Needed in the Fields of Reading and Communications

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SINCE TEACHERS began to teach and students began to learn, materials have been used to educate. The evaluation, selection, organization, and dissemination of these materials have been the province of librarians. Publishers and producers of materials supply their needs. In all, in the United States in 1973, approximately 5 million educators, librarians, and publishers are involved in this cycle, serving at least 75 million students and users of libraries—a figure that represents just under 40 percent of the population.

These three occupation groups inform and influence citizens in a special and important way. They are essential to the process of communication since they help to create, publish, disseminate, and use ideas in all forms with people who want or need to learn, to know. Thus, publishers, teachers and librarians are catalysts, and they share many important mutual concerns. Some of these are philosophical, such as intellectual freedom; others are practical, such as efforts to make the acquisition of materials by schools and libraries more efficient. Developments that work for the good of the professional groups—educators and librarians—work for the good of the commercial groups—publishers, producers, and distributors of materials. This rare symbiotic relationship exists between few, if any, other professionals and their commercial suppliers. No such relationship is more important because the people in this one are involved in the dissemination of *ideas*, not just things.

One might assume, therefore, that a great body of reading research exists that relates to library development and the use of general, or trade, books in schools and libraries. That, however, is not the case. By far the largest percentage of research that has been done in the area of

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reading instruction and textbooks is of minimal relevance to publishers of trade books and librarians. Textbook publishers conduct research on aspects of reading *instruction* programs, or other curricula; their focus is on the institutional needs of the in-school reader. Publishers of general books are more concerned with independent study and leisure-time reading. Most reading research is fragmented, conducted with small groups, related to a specific series of basal readers or reading programs, and tends to deal with lists of words, size of type, or format of materials. According to Jeanne Chall, "The reading field has . . . suffered from a dearth of synthesizers and theorists—people who pull together the evidence from the hundreds and thousands of small studies and try to build theories."¹

THE USES OF READING RESEARCH

Important as research is to educators and educational publishers and producers of media, trade publishers rarely turn to such data to find answers. Trade books are not written to provide progressive education from grades 1–12—i.e., to fit exactly into the curriculum—and they are not written to a specified word list or format. General publishers always are concerned about design and format of their books—especially those that include illustrations or other art work—but their desire is to create an effective format at a reasonable price, and which meets aesthetic standards, not to find the right size type for a particular reader at a specific age.

General publishers want to know what motivates people to read in general—to buy books and to use libraries—and they realize that access to books and other materials is an important part of that motivation.

A preliminary study of information about the motivation to read and the importance of accessibility indicates that these areas have not been heavily researched. There is an indication, also, that relevant findings have not been reported widely in the professional literature of reading research or library service, nor have the findings been fully or widely interpreted to educators and librarians, publishers, school board members, and other citizens.

A preliminary investigation of the literature indicates, also, that the research that has been done may be focused primarily on middle-class children or on the intellectually gifted, and may be old and out of date. Many studies reported as "research" have failed sufficiently to control variables; consequently, clear implications cannot be drawn for practical application.

Nevertheless, even a preliminary search of the literature suggests there may be findings in previously conducted research which are valuable and can be analyzed and reevaluated in light of the problems facing education today.

Many such studies are discussed in the preceding articles in this issue. In addition, Wollner² concluded in her research that generalizations about single variables are inadequate interpretations of the interrelationships of many factors that cause only some children to develop the habit of voluntary reading. Strang,³ on the other hand, concluded there are identifiable factors that stimulate reading.

Waples,⁴ Carnovsky,⁵ Link and Hopf,⁶ and others have attempted to identify factors that motivate people to read. Burger, *et al.*,⁷ developed a school environment which succeeded in tripling the mean number of books read per pupil per month.

Leavitt,⁸ Masterson,⁹ Monahan,¹⁰ Gaver,¹¹ and others have investigated the effect of accessibility on the reading behavior of school children and youth. Gaver,¹² in a review of the research about the effectiveness of elementary school libraries, concludes that children who have had continuing access to good school library collections, administered by *qualified* library personnel, generally read two to three times as many items in a greater variety of literary forms and interest areas, read more magazines, and may score higher on achievement tests.

In an extensive study of what makes adults read, Link and Hopf¹³ reported two major reasons why people read over half the books identified by the large population in their study: (1) convenience, 20 percent, and (2) recommendation (by family, friend, school, and others), 31 percent. Strang lists accessibility as the most important of the environmental factors influencing reading.¹⁴

The importance of accessibility and recommendation of books to children was recently investigated by Bissett.¹⁵ He reports that regardless of access to books in the home, the public library, and the school library, children in classrooms containing attractive collections read 50 percent more books than children in the same school without such collections. When teachers provide a program of teacher recommendations and peer recommendations, the number of books read increased another 100 percent. (The mean number of books read by children in rooms without collections was 8 in 15 weeks; with classroom collections, 11 in 15 weeks; with classroom collections and recommendations, 22 in 15 weeks.)

These studies and others cited above indicate that a comprehensive search may yield valuable insights into what motivates people to read and to develop permanent and rewarding reading habits. An analysis of the implications of these studies might well yield ideas about the *use* of their findings with the changing populations of the United States, especially among the educationally disadvantaged such as the following groups: children and adults in poverty stricken rural areas and those from these areas who have moved to large cities; children and adults learning English as a second language; second- and third-generation urban ghetto children who have not learned to read effectively, to name a few. Analysis of the implications of previous studies might:

1. discover usable findings which could be utilized in planning current educational and library programs for these audiences,
2. identify those research procedures which have been most fruitful in producing usable findings, and
3. identify research areas in which successful procedures and other techniques might be applied.

WHO SHOULD CONDUCT READING RESEARCH?

These activities are more appropriate to librarians and educators serving the population than to publishers of general books. After existing research has been evaluated by professionals in various agencies and they know what effect it will have on their programs, then producers need to know what materials are needed to do the job.

One example might be the urban information centers which are being established by some public libraries in large cities. For many years librarians have been asking publishers for simple, clear materials about legal problems, social services, consumer education, health, food, and other topics of vital, daily concern to economically disadvantaged adults. Many cannot read well and do not know how to cope with the government and bureaucracy. Now that programs are being initiated and funds allocated for staff and materials, a few general publishers might view these as topics for which a book market is emerging.

Another kind of material for which there is constant demand is high interest/low reading level materials. To ask for such materials from a general publisher is something of a contradiction in terms. Because trade books are not created in the same fashion as textbooks, little or no control over the author is exerted. The editing of trade books differs

from that of textbooks. Occasionally a trade book is published about a subject in which some slow readers are especially interested—cars, Black history or biography, a story about the West—and is written quite simply. This combination of an interesting subject and easy vocabulary means that the book is recommended as high interest/low reading level. But only rarely is a trade book written, edited, and published for this use. Usually high interest/low reading level materials are published as textbooks.

It remains, in my view, the responsibility of the professionals to survey education and library programs in order to collect sufficient data to convince an interested general publisher that a market exists for a particular book or kind of book. Please note: a need is *not* a market. Publishers have to know that a large number of people could use the book and they have to know that target education and library programs and funds exist for the purchase of appropriate materials. Suffice it to say that a few trade books are published because enough professionals convince a publisher that they need—and can purchase—that particular item.

Turning to the rest of the general book industry—that is, most of the books published today—what kind of research is needed? How does one find out what motivates people to read? Is this *reading* research, or *market* research, or *editorial* research? Can the same data be used by both professional and commercial groups? Should research be conducted by individual publishers or by the publishing industry as a whole?

It is often said that it would be impossible to do hard research to discover the effects of reading, or reading just books. As Harris says in this issue, it is neither possible nor desirable to isolate people from all but one form of communication. Thus, there could never be a control group of people who only read for information and do not watch television, listen to the radio, or see movies. Such individuals would be so impaired or unnatural in their lifestyles that knowledge about them would not be relevant to the general population. Therefore, it would seem that any major research project would have to study access to information in all available forms about specific topics.

All the media should be included, not just print materials and not just books. Libraries with multimedia collections offer this potential, of course, but what kind of libraries? Do we need a comprehensive research program to tell us what materials school and college libraries buy for their users? Are their purchases dictated in large part by the

curriculum offered? The answer is "yes," of course. Special libraries buy materials to serve their particular business or professional clientele—advertising people, stock brokers, lawyers, or doctors, for instance.

If public libraries of all sizes, serving all kinds of populations, were to be surveyed, the professions and the industry would learn a great deal about general reader tastes. The people being served, however, are already library users—they are already motivated, and they already know they have access to books and to other materials in libraries. But a great deal could be learned from library users about reading interests and how they change, the reasons people use libraries, what they want from libraries but cannot get, etc. A comprehensive library inventory should be done again. The last was conducted in 1949.¹⁶

RESEARCH IS COSTLY

One reason that such a study has not been done is undoubtedly that it would be expensive and time-consuming. Individual public librarians who know the interests of their patrons conscientiously evaluate thousands of current books and other materials each year, select and purchase them, and conduct programs to encourage their use. In addition, public libraries have been especially hard hit by cuts in federal support and decreasing state and local income at the time that costs for staff and materials are increasing. Although it would be interesting and helpful to know what is going on in public libraries across the country, a librarian's day-to-day challenge is in the local agency. These are difficult times in which to interest any group in supporting activities for the general good. Many Americans are having serious trouble solving their own problems, doing their own jobs, and paying their own bills.

Libraries and educators tend to charge the publishing industry with the responsibility for a comprehensive research study. In this issue, Nemeyer has pointed out that the cost of a nationwide study would be prohibitive for an industry doing a total annual volume of just over \$3 billion in 1973. Sad to say, the industry does not collect its statistics in such a fashion so that anyone can be certain what percentage of the total dollar volume is spent by libraries. Many publishers can analyze their own sales data to estimate what percentage of their total sale of trade books is to libraries, but certainly not all do this. A spokesman for Houghton Mifflin said in August 1973, that his company had determined that 70 percent of their trade books were sold to schools

and libraries. Some publishers estimate that the percentage is lower—around 50 percent. Publishers of hardcover children's books priced at \$1.00 and over probably sell between 80 and 90 percent of their books to libraries. About 50 percent of the sale of university press titles is to libraries.

One reason publishers do not know what percentage of their books goes to libraries is that many depend on wholesalers to fill actual orders from schools and libraries. Most wholesalers in this country serve the institutional market; the few who sell primarily to booksellers are easily identified. If their volume is subtracted from total wholesaler business, a publisher can estimate the volume of his institutional business. The percentage varies, of course, from house to house depending on the nature of the list. Some titles on a list obviously are not going to have a big library market—spiral bound cookbooks, for example—but for others libraries are expected to be the major market.

Bookstores and libraries behave differently as markets for books, which further confuses some publishers. Libraries are much slower to respond to a new title. It takes time to evaluate a new book, and many libraries wait for reviews. Thus, a book is often available for twelve to eighteen months before the library market decides whether to purchase and then order in quantity. Or a library may buy only a few copies of a new title to see if it is popular with patrons. If it is, they duplicate more heavily. If it turns out to be an important book, they keep replacing it as copies wear out and are discarded. In the meantime publishers have to allow some titles to go out of print because sales simply do not justify reprinting, warehousing and promoting the title. Standing order plans, Cataloging in Publication, reviews, exhibits, advertisements, and brochures and catalogs represent a publisher's attempt to bring books to the attention of educators and librarians as efficiently as possible.

Cost aside, it seems doubtful that the publishing industry alone would embark upon a comprehensive study of reading taste and motivation as reported by schools and libraries, or of the promotion and distribution of books. Many publishers do not see libraries as a major market for their particular publishing programs; hence, they do not spend much time and money to find out how these agencies function and what their needs are. Other publishers know that libraries are very important to their sales and profit picture and conduct their own market research to determine what kinds of books libraries buy and how various kinds of libraries evaluate, select, and purchase

materials. Having invested in such a research program, they tend to restrict their findings to in-house use by editorial and sales personnel.

If more publishers were convinced that libraries were a growing market potential, they might fund a research study. Robert W. Frase, formerly economist for the Association of American Publishers, recently offered a meaningful interpretation of the industry sales figures for 1972. Eliminating those categories of books for which libraries are not a potential market, he estimates that libraries purchase 40 percent of the balance of the total domestic sale.¹⁷ The percentage would increase substantially if one included sales of trade books to educators and students through college bookstores—sales that are generated by promotion to educators and librarians, not booksellers. Most publishers separate their domestic from their foreign business, and from “other” sales (which influences the profit picture, of course, but does not represent sales of the publisher’s edition to bookstores, wholesalers, schools and libraries which, in turn, make books available to readers). They can in this way calculate the percentage of domestic sales which is institutional, thus acquiring useful information for their own publishing program. If all trade publishers analyzed their own sales data in terms of the institutional markets, and used them in making editorial and sales decisions, they would be more aware of the need for general research into these markets. Alas, some houses assume that their trade books are published primarily for bookstores; their publishing decisions are made, therefore, on the basis of information passed through that filter alone.

HOW WOULD GENERAL PUBLISHERS USE RESEARCH DATA?

What general publishers do *not* need is a special analysis of topics in which people are especially interested at present. Editors and other publishing personnel tend to be well read and informed personally so they know what topics are “hot.” Knowing this, publishers then have to decide whether they want to publish in this field. Editors are often heard to say that they know a particular topic is of great national interest, but they do not think they are best qualified to produce such a book, i.e., edit an existing manuscript or recruit an author to write on that topic. After an editor has made the decision to publish, the publisher needs to decide whether or not the house is equipped to promote and sell a title. Some publishers are well established in particular fields and can sell a book successfully. Others are not known in these fields—nor do they want to be—and they do not publish books

in these categories. These are responsible publishing decisions. All publishers, buyers and readers of books know of books that have been mispublished or published by the wrong house. These titles miss their market, as it were. In addition, editors and publishers have to decide whether or not another book on a particular topic will sell if there have been several good books on that topic published earlier. There is a time to add a title in a subject area and a time to stay out of the market.

As Lacy says, the publishing of trade books is a creative process, not one tied to formula and wordlist.¹⁸ Editors seek writers who have talent, attempt to help them develop that talent to write books that can be commercial as well as artistic successes, and suggest topics for books when they are wanted. But as a rule the quality of the book comes first—not the idea that a particular title will sell. The trade publisher is responding to the talent of the writer, he is not responding to a void in the market, a change in the curriculum, or a shift in the school-age population.

The major area in which general publishers and producers of materials need information is marketing or distribution. Few publishers, as we have seen, sell books directly to individual readers. Publishers seem to feel cut off from current, significant information about the markets for the books they publish. Many have said that they would like to collect their sales data in a different, more refined fashion so that they know more about their own sales. It is assumed that books sold to most wholesalers are resold to schools and libraries—not to bookstores—but publishers do not know which titles are sold to what kind of schools and libraries serving what age group in response to what sales stimuli. Are sales a response to reviews, space advertisements, faculty recommendations, student interest, word of mouth, or what?

Most publishers depend heavily on their sales and promotion staffs to ask these and other questions. In their way these people constantly are conducting a very informal kind of market research. Trade salesmen who call on booksellers present their books, but they also collect information about books published in the preceding season—what sold and what did not, and why not—and they hear about a publisher's service. Delays in publication, printings, bindings and shipping are a problem for everyone. Some large publishers employ a sales force that calls on schools and libraries to sell trade books and other materials, and they gather information, too. If a publisher cannot afford a direct sales force in the institutional market, often he

employs a specialist in school and library promotion. A large part of this job usually is to get information about current needs, new programs being launched, changes in the curriculum, status of budgets, flow of federal funds, problems in acquiring books and other materials, and the like. Sales and promotion personnel who get into the fifty states and talk with customers of all kinds can generalize quite accurately about what the market needs and will buy. This information is very useful to sales and editorial personnel within the publishing house, but it is not market research.

PROPOSALS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

It has been suggested that a simple form including questions to the reader like the following be placed in every book sold:

- A. If you bought this book from a bookstore or other retail outlet:
 1. How convenient (in distance and time) is the nearest outlet?
 2. How often do you go there?
 3. Do you usually find what you want?
 4. Which kind of book is more easily available to you—hardcover or paperback?
 5. How much do you spend per year on books?
- B. If you bought this book through a book club:
 1. Do you belong to one book club (or more)?
 2. Why?
 3. Are you satisfied with title selection and service? (If yes, elaborate; if not, why not?)
 4. Do you also purchase books from bookstores (estimate number per year)?
 5. Do you also borrow books from libraries (estimate number per year)?
- C. If you borrowed this book from a public or educational library:
 1. How convenient (in distance and time) is the nearest library?
 2. How often do you go there?
 3. Do you find what you want in materials and services? (If yes, elaborate; if not, what is lacking?)
 4. Do you belong to a book club?
 5. Do you purchase books regularly (estimate number per year)?
 6. Do you borrow some categories of materials for specific purposes and buy others?

D. Attitude study:

1. Do you regularly read books and why?
2. What kinds of books do you prefer (i.e., analysis of subject interests)?
3. What percentage of your reading falls into the following categories:
leisure-time?
related to work?
related to formal/informal education?
other?
4. Do you prefer hardcover books to paperbacks? Why?
5. How do you prefer to obtain books (i.e., ranking of bookstores, and other retail outlets, libraries, and schools, book clubs, etc.)?
6. How do you find out about the books you read (reviews, author interviews on radio and television, word-of-mouth, teacher assignment, professional recommendation, etc.)?

If readers were asked to supply this information and answer basic inquiries about age, sex, subject area of study, leisure-time interests, place of residence, and the like, publishers could gather some useful data. However, the few attempts that have been made have produced negligible responses. If the survey were conducted professionally by opinion researchers, controls would exist, a valid sample could be identified, an efficient questionnaire would be used, and the response would be thoroughly analyzed.

Publishers who do collect comprehensive sales data and use it to make publishing decisions are in no way obligated to make such information generally available—to authors, to other publishing houses, or to educators and librarians. Much of this information is confidential data and cannot be made public.

Perhaps publishers and librarians together should attempt to fund, with the help of the government, a foundation, or a group of foundations, a comprehensive nationwide study of the distribution of books and other media. Schools and libraries do make public their materials budgets, and they could analyze their expenditures by kind of medium, subject area, age group, year of publication, and other factors. They know from which sources they acquire which materials—and how and when—and they know what affects their decision to purchase individual items and kinds of materials. This survey would be a tremendous task, but a very important one. The

National Center for Educational Statistics of the U.S. Office of Education is developing a new system of collecting nationwide statistics for all kinds of libraries. The new system, the Library General Information Survey (LIBGIS), will operate through collection of data by state agencies and tabulation by the federal government. A contract to design an operational handbook for the new system has been let to the ALA and will be directed by Robert Frase from his office in Washington.¹⁹

If publishers and producers of materials had hard data about the nature and size of the education and library markets, they would be more responsive to requests for materials, and they would promote and sell material more effectively and efficiently. As in every other area of mutual concern to these two groups, what benefits one benefits the other. These matters are too important to publishers and librarians, and to the people they serve, to continue to be a matter of random communication—which is what they generally are today.

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19. Interested readers can address Robert W. Frase at 1424 16 Street, N.W., Washington, D.C., 20036. (Tel. 202-265-5576)

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