

AS TIME GOES BY

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Synopsis

HOW MUCH TIME DO PEOPLE SPEND READING NEWSPAPERS, MAGAZINES AND BOOKS? IS READING TIME REALLY DECLINING?

In other words: Will there still be a need for a Readership Research Symposium in the year 2000? These and other fundamental questions will be addressed in this paper. The answers will be based upon the use of time-budget analysis.

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1. Introduction

*This day and age we're living in gives cause for apprehension*¹. Readership is declining all over the world, while people are spending more and more time watching television. Not only is the number of readers diminishing, but also the time they spend behind their papers, magazines and books. We are heading for the age of the illiterate, where the picture has swept away the written word. First it was McLuhan, and later, in the first half of the eighties, Postman, who predicted the end of reading². Maybe not for the pre-war generation that still grew up in innocence, without television, but certainly for the post-war generation that was breast-fed with TV-dinners. According to Postman, the attraction of the screen is so great, that children who grew up with it will never turn another page. *Yet, we get a trifle weary with Mister Postman's theory.* In Europe at least³. All these negative thoughts may be true for the brave new world, but certainly not for the old world with its deeply-rooted traditions of writing and reading. In Dutch society for example, it is indeed true: children read less than their parents. But hasn't that always been the case? And on the other hand: in the 1980's, public libraries were thriving, circulation figures and the number of pages of daily newspapers grew considerably and so did the number of magazine titles. So let's see if we can *release the tension* by looking at some research figures.

- 1 As time goes by. Words and music by Herman Hupfeld, 1931.
- 2 Postman, Neil, *The Disappearance of Childhood*, New York, 1982.
- 3 Voort, Tom van der, *Televisie en lezen*, text of the author's inaugural lecture delivered on the acceptance of his office of child and media studies at Leiden University (December 15th, 1989), in *Masscommunicatie*, 1990/1, pp. 3-21.

2. Time-budget research

Is reading time really declining, and has TV anything to do with it? Sales figures for books and the number of loans by public libraries are certainly not valid indicators of reading time⁴. At most public libraries, you can take home with you as many books as you like, without having to pay extra. Sales figures of books may be boosted by television (!), but reading time certainly is not. I wonder how many of you, who of course have all bought *A secret history* by Donna Tartt, at least for the drawing room table, have actually read it?

Circulation figures for daily newspapers may have grown, but they are not keeping up with the growing number of households. Coverage fell to an all-time low of 77% in 1992. So relatively fewer people get to see a newspaper.

Of course, we can ask people how much time they spend reading and watching television. But these questionnaire results are disputable. Because watching television is still regarded as an inferior way of passing the time, compared with reading, people do tend to overestimate their reading time and underestimate the time they spend in front of the screen⁵. These objections do not hold, however, when we ask people to keep a time-budget diary of their activities, since then they do not know what activities the researcher is interested in⁶. Based on the assumption of the validity of diary data, Knulst and Kalmijn calculated the errors in questionnaire data on reading books and watching television (Figure 1).

As can be seen, especially the better-educated in particular are grossly overestimating their reading time. And of course, now that we are all in one common market, there is no reason to assume that the educated Dutch are bigger boasters than their fellow highbrow Europeans.

Comparison of questionnaire and diary

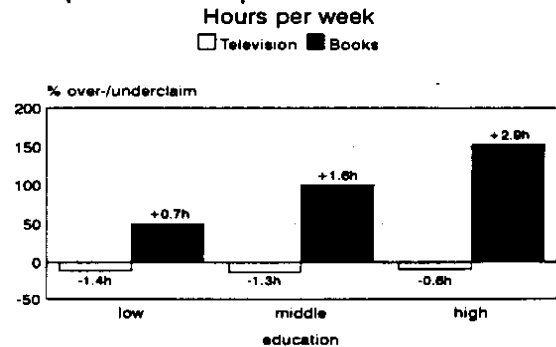


Figure 1

Time-budget research has a long and international history⁷. Time-budget data, usually based on some sort of diary method, is extremely rich. Time-budget data can answer a wide range of different questions. A time budget diary contains information on persons, their actions, the places and situations where 'it' happens, and time. Not just the amount of time, but also the order, frequency and rhythm of things. Based on a matrix of these elements: persons, actions, situations and time, Blass distinguishes ten different categories of questions to which time-budget data can provide the answers⁸. To give only a few relevant examples for reading behaviour: What are the characteristics of the people who still read a lot? What different kinds of reading activities do young children engage in? How much time do different groups of people have available for reading? At what moments do people read? What is the rhythm of media activities, how often and at what intervals do they occur? The narrative account of activities over a certain period of time also creates the possibility of investigating a broad range of different subjects. Time-budget research has been used to analyze division of labour, traffic problems and participation in cultural activities. Our main point of interest, the analysis of reading behaviour, is only one of the many possibilities.

- 4 Voort, Tom van der, and Johannes Beentjes, De bruikbaarheid van indicatoren voor het vaststellen van historische trends in het lezen, in: *Massacommunicatie*, 1992/2, pp. 91-102.
- 5 Knulst, Wim, and Matthijs Kalmijn, *Van woord naar Beeld?*, with an English summary, Rijswijk, 1988.
- 6 Gershuny, Jonathan, International Comparisons of Time Budget Surveys - Methods and opportunities, in: Schweitzer, Rosemarie von u.a. (eds) *Zeitbudgeterhebungen. Ziele Methoden und neue Konzepte*, Stuttgart 1990.
- 7 For an overview: Gershuny, Johnatan, Time budget research in Europe. Paper for the Eurostat Working Party on Social Indicators, 23 March 1992.
- 8 Blass, Wolfgang, Theoretische und methodische Grundlagen der Zeitbudgetforschung, in: Schweitzer, Rosemarie von u.a. (eds) *Zeitbudgeterhebungen. Ziele Methoden und neue Konzepte*, Stuttgart, 1990.

3. Methodological questions

There are many ways of recording how people spend their time. Even when we restrict ourselves to diary methods, numerous methodological questions arise⁹. For instance, do we take a sample of people or a sample of days? Do we use fixed or variable time intervals? Pre-coded activities or natural language? Do we wish to record simultaneous activities? And how on earth do we analyze the tens of thousands of separate pieces of information which are the result?

We can use interviewers to do all the work or ask the respondents to fill out self-completion diaries and questionnaires. Data can be collected through paper and pencil interviews (PAPI), or electronically through a CATI or CAPI system. There are even examples of time-budget diaries collected from an electronic panel of computerized households.

The last possibility seems to overcome many problems in terms of coding activities and non-response. Because errors can be corrected by the respondents themselves and activities are automatically coded by the system, this method proves to be relatively cheap compared with other ways of collecting time-budget data¹⁰.

This paper will not deal with methodological problems. However, it should be borne in mind that the choice of methodology can have severe consequences in terms of costs and in terms of possibilities of analysing your data. If you restrict collection of diary data to one or two days, for example, aggregated data will give a good picture of reading behaviour, but you will not be able to do much analysis on an individual basis because many reading activities have a cycle of one week, e.g. reading a weekly¹¹.

4. The Dutch time-budget survey

The Dutch time-budget survey is unique in more ways than one. The survey was first conducted in 1975 and repeated in 1980, 1985 and 1990. The sample size, on average 3000 people of 12 years and older, is relatively large. Respondents have to fill out a self-completion diary during one week in October. The diary uses fixed time intervals of fifteen minutes, 24 hours a day. More than 200 different activities are coded in a reference dictionary. Since the methodology has hardly changed in those 15 years, it is possible to make comparisons over time.

9 Gerahuny, *ibidem*.

10 Kalfs, Nelly and Willem E. Saris, *Mode effects in time diary research*, in *Kwantitatieve Methoden* 1991, pp 65-86.
Kalfs, Nelly and Willem E. Saris, *The effects of different modes of data collection: A comparison of an electronic and a paper-and-pencil diary*, unpublished paper, 1992, pp 1-25.

11 Gershuny, 1990.

5. Reading in Holland

5.1 Reading-time 1975-1990

Reading is only one way of spending your time. Most of our time we use for sleeping and eating (45%). Education (4%), and labour, either in (13%) or out (11%) of the home, are big time consumers. What is left is leisure time (27% or 47 hours in a week).

Of that leisure time, 39%, or a little more than 18 hours a week, is spent on the media¹². Figure 2 shows how these 18 hours are divided between television, radio and the reading of papers, magazines and books¹³.

Between 1975 and 1990, reading time in Holland gradually declined. This is mostly due to a decline in reading frequency. There are fewer and fewer people who do open a paper, a magazine or a book during the course of a week.

Figures 3 and 4 show how reading time dropped for magazines and for daily newspapers. Particularly the youngest age-group, those between 12 and 19 years old, seem to be spending their time on anything but reading nowadays.

Not only is reading time declining in an absolute sense, but also as part of the total leisure time available (Figure 5). In 1990, the TV-dinner generation spent less than 10% of its free time reading a paper, a magazine or a book.

Media use in the Netherlands
Time budget survey 1990

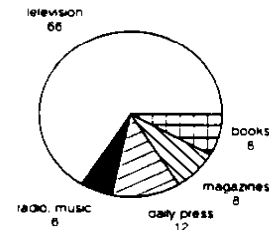


Figure 2

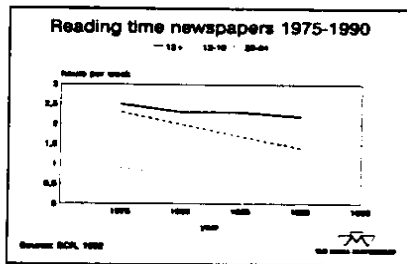


Figure 3

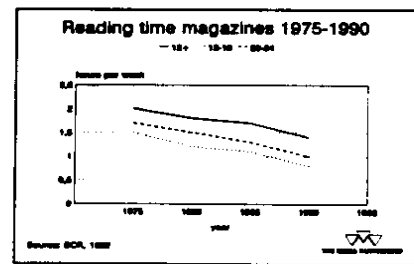


Figure 4

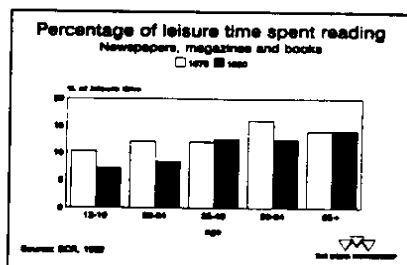


Figure 5

12 SCP, Sociaal en Cultureel Rapport 1992, Rijswijk, September 1992.

13 Cebuco, Een kwestie van tijd, Deel 1, Ontwikkeling mediagebruik, Amsterdam, juli 1992.

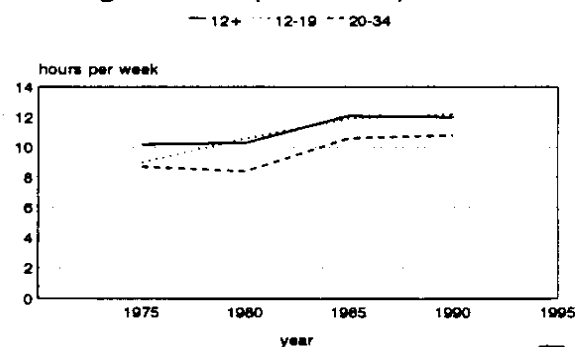
5.2 The Influence of Television

It is said that television, the cause of many evils, is also to blame for the reduction in reading-time. Between 1975 and 1985, weekly viewing-time in Holland increased by 19% whereas reading-time in the same period decreased by 13%. However, it has been shown that television certainly is not the only cause¹⁴. Between 1975 and 1990 the whole range of different possible ways of spending one's time expanded tremendously. Knulst and Kalmijn showed that *"people have not exclusively cut their reading time in order to be able to watch more television. They have also sacrificed time for relaxing and conversation (...)* In the second place reading time was already under pressure from other leisure activities even before the new possibilities of television were there. Over the years the number of people engaged both in professional work and household work has increased, and this more time-consuming existence also seems to have been at the expense of the concentration required for reading. Something similar happened in leisure activities: particularly because of sports and hobbies, people have been far more busy since 1975, and this greater activity has partly been at the expense of reading time¹⁵."

In the five years following this conclusion, trends seem to have been reinforced. Particularly for people of 20 to 49 years, between 1985 and 1990 leisure time became even more scarce. This was caused by the increasing combination of work, education and household tasks¹⁶.

Apart from this overall activity, results also show that particularly those who were brought up with television as the main source of entertainment and did not develop a firm reading habit, have traded reading time for viewing time. Figure 6 shows the absolute increase in viewing time. For the 12-19 age-group the proportion of leisure time spent on electronic media grew to 36% in 1990.

Viewing time TV (incl. VCR) 1975-1990



Source: SCR, 1992

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Figure 6

14 Knulst, Wim, en Matthijs Kalmijn, *Van woord naar beeld?*, with an English summary, Rijswijk, 1988.

15 Knulst and Kalmijn, 1988, p. 173

16 Knulst, Wim, *De verdeling van de drukte: ontwikkelingen in de (vrije) tijdsbesteding 1975-1990*, in: *Onderzoek*, April 1992, pp. 14-20.

Though between 1985 and 1990 viewing time as a principal activity did not increase much, this does not mean that the growth in television viewing has stopped. Figure 7 shows the increase in total viewing time as measured by the people meter, since 1990¹⁷.

Viewing time from 1990 till the present has mainly increased because of the expanding supply of programs on the 3 public broadcasting channels and on RTL4, the (Dutch) commercial channel. Nowadays, Dutch viewers can at many times of the day choose among four qualitatively comparable programs in their own language, or at least subtitled in their own language. Viewing also starts earlier in the evening (or late in the afternoon). The TV-dinner is conquering Dutch society. And as the older people had already had stretched their viewing time to the limits, it is the younger age-groups which are mainly responsible for this overall growth.

Viewing time in hours per week
1990 - 1993

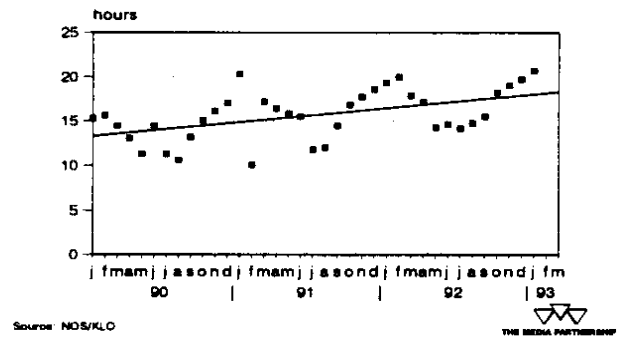
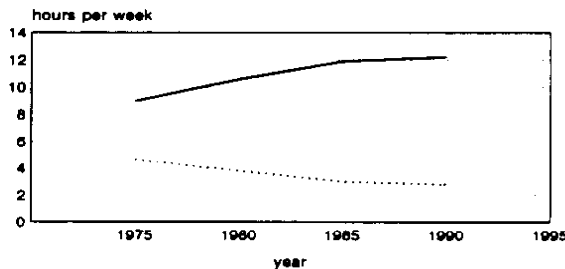


Figure 7

Reading and watching 1975-1990

12-19 years
— TV ... Reading

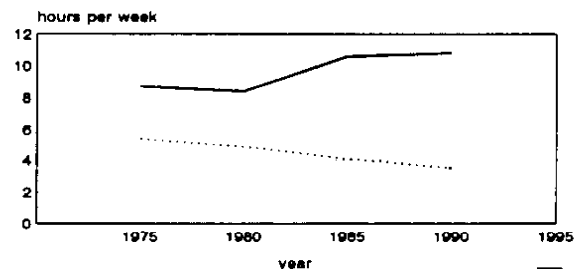


Source: SCR, 1992

Figure 8

Reading and watching 1975-1990

20-34 years
— TV ... Reading



Source: SCR, 1992

Figure 9

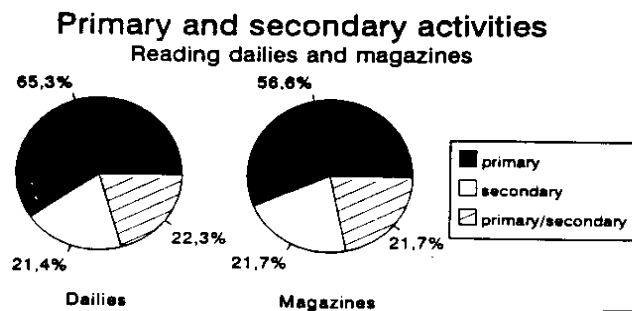
Figures 8 and 9 show the increasing gap between reading time and viewing time for the youngest age groups.

5.3 Reading as primary and as secondary activity

In the Dutch time-budget survey of 1990, reading could not only be coded as a primary activity, but also as a secondary activity. People can read a paper and do nothing else at the same time, but can also read it while having breakfast, while travelling or while watching TV¹⁸.

Nearly half of the time that people spend with newspapers and magazines, they are doing something else as well (Figure 10). Reading can either be a secondary activity, or reading can be the main object of attention, accompanied by the use of other media.

Figure 10



17 In the Dutch time budget survey TV watching is registered in two ways: as a principal activity and as a sideline activity. Time budget results presented in this paper regard viewing as a principal activity, unless mentioned otherwise. The sum of principal and sideline viewing comes very close to total viewing time as measured in the People meter panel.

18 AGB Intomart, Tijdsbestedingsonderzoek 1990, SUMMO-rapportage, Amsterdam, November 1991.

Dailies and magazines as a sideline

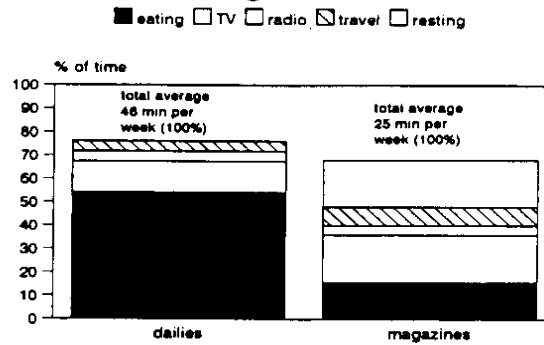


Figure 11

As can be seen in figure 11, the reading of dailies is a favorite side-dish while eating breakfast, mostly. You don't read a daily in bed, unless you like black sheets, of course. But you can obviously read magazines whilst sleeping.

5.4 Reading moments

The time-budget data reveal not only for how long people read, but also when and where people read. When do you get in touch with your audience? Before the shops open, or after closing-time? When they are hungry, or after they have had a good meal? Particularly now that psychographic segmentation seems to fail in explaining consumer behaviour, interest in time-based segmentation is growing. The same consumer can be visiting the (expensive) Bijenkorf department store one day to buy a shirt, and the (much cheaper) Hema the next day for his underwear. The largest Dutch magazine publisher, VNU, is investigating the possibilities for time-based segmentation of consumers¹⁹. Time-budget surveys are one way of coping with this kind of question.

In practise, time-based segmentation for weeklies and monthlies will be extremely difficult. For dailies the moment of delivery decides very much the reading moment. In the past 20 years, most regional evening papers switched to morning delivery. This has greatly influenced the reading behaviour of the Dutch population. One can even ask whether this change has had a negative effect on total reading time, since the news now has to be digested while having breakfast and before going to work, instead of after dinner, with the whole evening ahead.

6. International comparisons²⁰

Due to differences in purpose and methodology, international comparisons are not easily made. In spite of these difficulties, the International Association for Time-Use Research has succeeded in compiling a retrospective multinational longitudinal comparative dataset with material from 35 surveys covering 17 countries²¹. Reading is one of the activities coded in these data. Unfortunately the dataset, required more time than was available for the preparation of this paper.

Very recently, an international time-budget study was commissioned by the IP Group. The 9,774 persons aged 15 years and older were interviewed. The survey covered 20 European countries. Since it was IP's first Euro Time survey, comparisons over time can not (yet) be made. It is however possible to make international comparisons of media behaviour.

Sample sizes do not permit much differentiation between age-groups in the participating countries, at least not for reading behaviour. In the next set of figures, therefore, results on the reading of newspapers and magazines are given for the whole sample per country.

On the horizontal axis you can see the percentage of people who participate in that activity. The vertical axis gives you the number of minutes they spend on it on an average weekday.

19 Rodenburg, John and Paul Sikkema, Individu-moment benadering, in *Onderzoek*, mei 1992, pp. 6-9.

20 The author would like to thank Dr. R. Batenburg of the Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau and Mrs. H. Kimman of IP Nederland for their help in the search for international data.

21 Gershuny, *ibidem*.

The dividing line between greater or lesser reading of newspapers runs between the north and the south of Europe. In general the most frequent and longest readers are found in the Scandinavian countries, whereas the newspaper reading culture in the Mediterranean countries is less widespread.

Reading a newspaper
Penetration * time (weekdays)

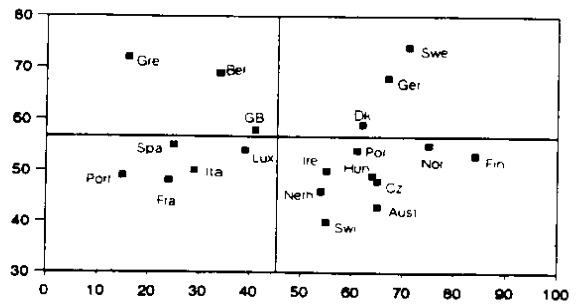
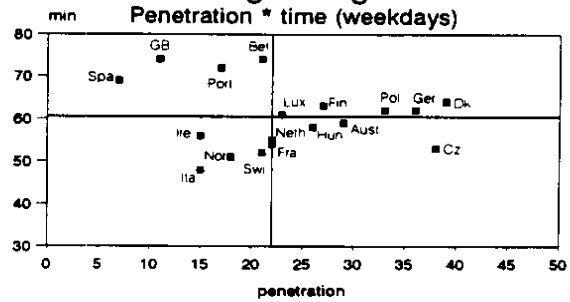


Figure 12

For magazines, overall penetration figures on weekdays are much lower than for newspapers. In Spain as well as in Great Britain however, this seems to be compensated by the reading time, which is well over one hour a day.

Reading a magazine
Penetration * time (weekdays)



7. Conclusions

Time-budget analysis is a valuable tool for readership research. Time-budget analysis puts reading into perspective. The Dutch time-budget survey, with its large national sample and its continuity over time is an outstanding example of this kind of research. Only a few of the many possibilities have been demonstrated in this paper.

Figures show that there is much to say for the theories of McLuhan and Postman. Readership is declining rather fast, and television is the medium that is at least partly gaining from it. It is the number of readers that is diminishing, and not so much the reading time. Reading is becoming more of an elite activity. On the charts with the figures from the Euro Time survey, it can be seen that penetration figures for newspaper and magazine reading in the Netherlands are somewhere around the European average. You can see for yourself where your own country is situated.

Will there still be a Readership Research Symposium in the 21st century? Well: *You must remember this ... The fundamental things apply, as time goes by*²².

Diemen, March 14, 1993.