VOLUNTARY READING HABITS OF STUDENTS OF THE WOMEN'S COLLEGE
KERMIT W. OBERLIN*

INTRODUCTION

It is plain that personality is dependent upon a multitude of factors other than the printed word. Certainly, too, it is safe to assume that one's habits of reading are dependent upon a variety of conditions, e.g. family, friends, community, availability of libraries, even laterality, i.e. dominance of right or left handedness. Despite this extremely complex interrelationship of forces, a start has been made toward the measurement of reading habits in groups of people and in correlating these habits with some external influence.

The author of the present article, Miss Idair Smookler, has taken the step, the first as far as I know, of making a survey of reading habits among students of the Women's College, Delaware. This work was done in connection with a course in Applied Psychology in the spring of 1938. The responsibility of composing the questionnaire, accumulating and classifying the data and making the report has rested solely with Miss Smookler. The questionnaire is to some extent unique in that it covers the reading of books, magazines and newspapers, even extending to parts of the latter. The fact that such a large proportion of the student body is represented here can be accounted for only by the diligence of the author who took the time to interview, personally, each one whose opinion was recorded.

The significance of such a study can be seen from several points of view. As a portrait of individual differences among members of a college community in one respect, it is interesting, psychologically. It is economically significant, from the point of view of journalism and advertising, to find the treatment accorded to different parts

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of the newspaper by a group as homogeneous as college students. Socially, I think, it is important to know what effect such a thing as commuting has on reading. Educationally, no one can deny that such a study is essential. Despite the recent rise to popularity of the radio and movies as educational tools, reading is by far the most influential force in education for, at least one very simple reason—one may reread.

I regret only that we do not have more of such studies so that other factors could be included and the field more completely surveyed.

A Report on the

VOLUNTARY READING HABITS OF STUDENTS
OF THE WOMEN'S COLLEGE

By IDAIR SMOOKLER

Although reading mechanics and difficulties have been investigated thoroughly and completely enough to have become an established field in psychology, the study of reading habits has just begun and is still in the embryonic stage. "The existing scientific studies based on isolated pieces of research while valuable, must be considered as inconclusive, and conclusions based on them are presented as tentative."¹

Perhaps it would be well to explain exactly what the term "reading habits" means. Most people do not consider their reading as a habit but would say as one girl did, that they do not have any reading habits—they "just read". Yet these same persons would probably show considerable differences in their reading. One might enjoy Shakespeare, while another would be bored by him, and still others might hardly ever read anything but newspapers and magazines. These preferences and differences are really habits—reading habits. And like all habits, reading habits are determined by definite social, economic, environmental and psychological factors. The
character of an individual may influence his reading, but that very character has been and will be, at least partly, formed by the reading of the individual. "What influence has ... reading on the character of the mature individual? In order to answer this question the evidence afforded in biographies and autobiographies, by note books, diaries, library records and observation will need to be studied exhaustively. The correlation of reading habits with mental characteristics and with achievements will need to be worked out. As yet the subject is almost untouched and the findings of significant studies may revolutionize the reading guidance in homes, schools and libraries."¹

The aim of this work concerning reading habits is "to discover the motives that prompt people to read, the influences which stimulate keen interest in reading, the amount and kind of reading that is done, the types of books and magazines read, and the effect of such factors as age, sex, race, nationality, education, and type of community on the amount and character of the reading that is done."² The final result of all these investigations will be to establish desirable reading habits.

This study was made in April 1938. The number of students in the Women's College at that time was 294; the number of questionnaires on which this study is based is 215, over 73% of the college students. Most of the students are of the same age group—between 17 and 25 years. They are definitely a middle class group economically. Most of their parents are "well-off," though perhaps a few might be classed as rich or poor. Only a few are not from the state of Delaware. Geographically they can be divided into two groups—those from Wilmington, and those from the rest of the state. Wilmington is the only large city in the state, the rest of the state being composed of small towns and farms.

A real difference which divides the students is whether they live at the college or commute. The commuters are mostly those girls who live in Wilmington or near it. However, quite a few Wilmington girls are
residents. The residents are by college rules pretty closely bound to Newark, so they are restricted in their choice of books to the Newark Public Library, the University Library, the dormitory collections, and the various drug stores. The college girls (except for Newark residents) do not use the Newark Public Library. The University Library is well stocked in technical and academic material but does not contain much fiction. The students also have at their disposal the Emma Worrell and the Browsing Room Libraries. These are collections of books housed in the dormitories. They are rather small and are composed of classical works and out-dated fiction. The University Library has a large selection of magazines, though the greater part of these are of a technical nature. Numerous magazines are bought by the students, and when one girl buys a magazine, at least ten other girls read it. There are newspapers in each dormitory, in Science Hall and in the University Library. Nevertheless, resident students do not have much interest in news and do not do a great deal of newspaper reading. They are college-bound and do not have very many interests outside of campus affairs. To give one example of this isolation; several days after Hitler’s seizure of Czechoslovakia, one of the students mentioned that she had heard some rumors that he was threatening that country.

A commuter, whether she was greatly interested or not, would probably have known that item of news. Commuters, unlike the residents, are not separated from their homes and from the usual activities and interests in which the resident students only engage when they leave college. They are more subject to distractions in their school work but more liable to have outside reading interests. They have greater opportunity to obtain books (especially fiction) but I do not by any means think they read more. Because they do not have the “circulating magazine system” of the residents, the commuters do not have as many magazines available. Commuters do have more incentive to read newspapers.
VOLUNTARY READING HABITS

This study has been a purely objective survey. Its only purpose is to discover and report any general facts about the voluntary reading of students. I must emphasize that this survey applies only to voluntary reading, that is, reading done by the students of their own free will, not the compulsory reading necessary for the courses they take. The amount of compulsory reading is one of the main causes for the outstanding fact evident in this study—that the students do not read much because they do not have the time. From Christmas to the time of the questionnaire (about three and a half months) an average of 5 books per person had been read, or about 1.45 books per person each month. Moreover, this average was reached because some few persons read a great many books. Some had read over forty books in that period; yet, at the same time, 129 (over half the number) read less than 5 books in this period, and 60 persons read no books whatever. Some persons wait till vacation to do their reading. And, on the whole, those books which are read are of fairly good quality.

All except 2 persons reporting read some newspaper. The average time spent was between 15 and 30 minutes per day. Only 139 persons reported on the time of magazine reading. More people than that read magazines (I think they could not decide on any definite time to put down). Those who did answer spend an average of 3 hours per week in reading magazines.

The figures gathered show that there is not much reading done and that most of that which is done, though not of poor quality, is certainly not of the "thinking" type. Some students do no reading outside of class work. The majority find college rather strenuous and when they read voluntarily, they read material that does not require much mental activity. This cessation from voluntary reading is usually unnoticed, yet it is extremely important. For while the students are learning what to think, they are not learning how to think. They could probably tell the good points of the mercantilist theory, and its bad points, but could they do the same with the New Deal?
Most college work is simply the process of assimilating pre-digested material. That is all very well, the matters taught in college are in the main past events upon which judges more competent than we have passed full judgment. But we will not be students forever. We will be citizens faced with new problems for which no standards exist. We will have to decide those problems ourselves. Our decisions may be strongly influenced by our reading habits. Just as a man who has seen many pictures is better able to judge the merits of a picture by Michaelangelo and a picture by Maxfield Parrish, so one who has read much will be better able to distinguish a statesman from a demagogue and a truthful authoritative statement from a false evasive statement. Upon the critical faculties of the people depends the fate of democracy.

Because college graduates have a diploma to prove that they have gone to classes and lectures for four years, it does not follow that they are any better equipped for thinking than the person who quit school in the ninth grade. Certainly they are not particularly well trained intellectually if they have become accustomed to accept authoritative-sounding statements without bothering to think about them or verifying the facts stated, or going to the sources and digging out the facts for themselves. That is the real value of reading. That is why the adjective “well-read” is synonymous with those other adjectives “intelligent” and “educated.” That is the most important benefit of a college education. A college education is supposed to train students in the appreciation of worthwhile works and to broaden their interests so that after they leave College they will be equipped to do their own thinking.

This dearth of serious voluntary reading does not appear to be a very encouraging indication. However, it must be remembered that this may be only an interlude. A test of these same girls after they have been out of college for several years is really needed to complete this report. That would determine whether four years have developed a habit of not reading or if, with
the end of college and compulsory reading, there is a greater degree of voluntary reading. If the latter case should be true, I think that their choice of reading matter would be influenced by their college training. But the problem is——will they do any reading?

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire used for this study was taken from two different sources. The form of the questions was taken from the questionnaire used in a study by the Queensborough Public Library and published in the book "Woodside Does Read." This is the simplest form I could find. In most cases all the possible answers are placed below each question, and answering involves only circling the number beside the right answer. Of course it is likely that in some cases all the possible answers are not present, therefore, space is also given so any answer not in the questionnaire can be written in. The question-naire is rather long but I did not think that the mental capacity of a college student should be overtaxed by it. In some cases I found that I was wrong.

The questions used were in the main taken from the questionnaire used by William S. Gray and Ruth Munroe for their report, "The Reading Interests and Habits of Adults." It is more complete and covers every aspect of reading habits better than any other questionnaire that I have yet seen. Of course some of the questions had to be altered to fit the particular group studied, and some questions were added.

There is liable to be some falsification in the results but I think that it is very slight. The students were very scrupulous in trying to answer each question as correctly as possible. So, this report is as true and exact as human memory will permit.

RESULTS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Number of students in college ....................... 294
Number of questionnaires ......................... 215
Questionnaires According to Class
Senior ........................................... 34
Junior ........................................... 46
Sophomore ....................................... 67
Freshman ........................................ 64

Questionnaires According to School
Arts and Science .................................. 131
Education ......................................... 40
Home Economics ................................... 34

Questionnaires Answered By
Commuters ....................................... 113
Residents ......................................... 96

I got one question answered which I did not even ask. That showed how good the reading attention of the students was. On the first page of the questionnaire, at the top, underlined, was the direction to circle the number of the answer or answers which were correct. Thirty-five persons encircled or underlined the answers or checked the numbers.

What newspapers do you read?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Newspaper</th>
<th>No. Reading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Journal—Every Evening</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilmington Morning News</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Times</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia Record</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evening Bulletin</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herald Tribune</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Star</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>632</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All the papers above are dailies except the Review which is the weekly paper published by Delaware College and the Star which is the only Delaware Sunday paper.
The papers included under "Others" are mostly local papers and are not read by many people. Included are several Irish papers and one London one.

Which parts of the paper do you usually read?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Front page</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comic section</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News items inside paper</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home page</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movie page</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editorial page</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ads</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columns</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other parts</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among "Other parts" one person listed Obituary.

Which of the methods below most nearly describes your method of reading the paper?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Read everything about my special interests</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have no special plan</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glance at headlines</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read front page thoroughly</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read columns chiefly</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read almost everything thoroughly</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read comic section</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do you obtain your news from any of the following sources?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movies</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why do you read newspapers?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest in news</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation or relaxation</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Some other reasons given for reading the newspaper were—"So I won’t have to do my work", habit, general curiosity, "because I think it essential to know something about world affairs", and for the human interest angle.

Is the paper usually available?

Yes ........................................... 206
No ............................................. 8

The negative answers to this question might be called falsification. Since the College provides papers in each building it cannot really be said that papers are not available.

Do you have much spare time?

Yes ........................................... 14
No ............................................. 198

Some of the students were very emphatic about their answers.

Do you usually agree with the point of view of your favorite newspaper?

Yes ........................................... 105
No ............................................. 89

What magazines do you usually read?

Reader's Digest ................................ 154
Life ............................................ 150
Good Housekeeping ........................... 150
Ladies' Home Journal ........................ 132
McCall's ..................................... 120
VOLUNTARY READING HABITS

Better Homes and Gardens ........................................... 92
The American .................................................................. 88
Vogue .............................................................................. 85
Saturday Evening Post .................................................. 71
Cosmopolitan ................................................................... 65
Time .................................................................................. 62
Redbook .......................................................................... 60
Collier's ............................................................................ 60
Esquire .............................................................................. 53
National Geographic ....................................................... 45
Look ................................................................................ 40
Coronet ............................................................................. 39
Liberty .............................................................................. 31
Atlantic Monthly .............................................................. 27
Country Gentleman ............................................................ 26
Literary Digest ................................................................. 24
Motion Picture .................................................................. 16
Screen Guide ..................................................................... 10
Woman's Home Companion ................................................ 8
Mademoiselle ................................................................... 7
Silver Screen ..................................................................... 6
Survey .............................................................................. 6
Harper's ............................................................................ 6
Pictorial Review ............................................................... 5
Harper's Bazaar ................................................................ 5
College Humor ................................................................... 5

Which parts of magazines do you usually read?

Short stories ..................................................................... 180
Articles of special interest to my own work or hobby ............... 140
Articles on general subjects .................................................. 138
Cartoons .......................................................................... 138
Ads ................................................................................ 72
Serial stories ..................................................................... 67
Letters from readers ........................................................... 56
Editorial section ............................................................... 31

What items best describe your reasons for reading magazines and books?

Recreation or relaxation .................................................... 185
General information .......................................................... 142
Self improvement .............................................................. 90
Conversational purpose ........................................ 52
Information about my vocation ............................... 48
Habit ................................................................. 48
Information about some special hobby .................... 39
Information about college life ................................. 11

Has school had any influence on your reading?

Yes ................................................................. 178
No ................................................................. 30
Unanswered ....................................................... 7

The way in which school has influenced their reading is mostly in stimulating the interests of the students in reading. This, though, is counteracted by the same influence, for school leaves them so little time that they are not able to do much reading. Another way in which school influences reading is by affecting choice of reading material. One girl wrote that school had influenced her reading "by making me read certain books I wouldn't have read but it has kept me from reading the ones I wanted to." Another girl said, "I have had to read books by certain authors, I didn't like the books, so I don't read any more of that author's books."

Which libraries do you use frequently?

University of Delaware Library ............................. 178
Wilmington Public Library ................................. 135
Browsing Room Library ......................................... 27
Emma Worrell Library ........................................... 27
Newark Public Library ........................................... 18
Brandywine Branch Library .................................... 8
Others .......................................................... 54

The libraries included under "Others" are mostly small local or school libraries. Several people use the Philadelphia Public Library.

Mention three or more books you have read recently.

Gone With the Wind—Mitchell .............................. 21
Northwest Passage—Roberts ................................. 9
Citadel—Cronin ........................................ 7
Drums Along the Mohawk—Carmer ....................... 6
If I Have Four Apples—Lawrence ......................... 6
The Arts—van Loon .................................. 6
Of Human Bondage—Maugham ............................ 5

There were a great many books read by only a few persons, but the list is far too long to include here. Therefore I am just giving the most popular books. Remember also that about 25% of the students had read no books.

What kind of books do you usually read?

Fiction ............................................ 195
Biography ......................................... 104
Literature ........................................ 87
Travel .............................................. 63
History ........................................... 51
My vocation ....................................... 50
Religion and Philosophy .............................. 20
Fine Arts ......................................... 19
Science ............................................ 18

How do you obtain your books?

Public libraries .................................... 171
Borrowed from friends ................................. 118
Purchased from bookstores ............................ 96
Gift .................................................. 71
Rental libraries ................................... 26
Book club .......................................... 26

"Public libraries" includes the University Library.

Which way do you select your books?

Recommendation of friends ........................... 140
Knowledge of author ................................ 137
Special subject .................................... 97
Book reviews ....................................... 86
Convenience ....................................... 29
Book club .......................................... 10
When were you most interested in reading?

I am not including the figures for this question because I think it was misunderstood. "Interested in reading" in the question was supposed to refer to the time when the subject had done the most reading. I can see that the question is rather ambiguous, since it can also mean when did the subject have the greatest desire to read. The question was interpreted both ways. Those who answered the question according to the first meaning almost invariably stated some time before college. The reasons were more time and interest in adventure stories. Others said that they were most interested in reading in the summertime because then they did not have any school work to take up their time. Those who interpreted the question in its second meaning said that they are most interested in reading now because college has stimulated their desire to read.

Would you read more if you had more time?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unanswered</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The affirmative answers were usually rather emphatic.

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3 Kelley, G. O. & Others—Woodside Does Read, a survey of the reading interests and habits of a local community. Queens Borough Public Library, 1935.