Kicking the Habit

The Decline of Reading in Europe?

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Steve Jobs has said about books, ‘the fact is that people don’t read anymore’. Is this true of Europe? How are reading habits changing across the continent? What are the differences between the countries and regions of Europe, and what could explain those differences? Are there also changes in what we read?

If surveys do suggest a decline in reading of books over time, this is hardly surprising given the competition the book faces from a variety of other media, from TV to computer games and the Internet, and there has been a definite shift in the place of the book in society. Many people would prefer the relaxation of watching TV to opening a novel. The Internet is the preferred source of factual information and social networking is the most popular activity online. There are conflicting demands on people’s time and the rhythm of life often denies the breathing space in which a book can be picked up and enjoyed.

In the novel Saturday by Ian McEwan, Henry Perowne, a successful neurosurgeon, finds reading fiction hard work:

his free time is always fragmented, not only by errands and family obligations and sports, but by the restlessness that comes with these weekly islands of freedom. He doesn’t want to spend his days off lying, or even sitting, down. … He doesn’t seem to have the dedication to read many books all the way through. Only at work is he single-minded; at leisure, he’s too impatient. He’s surprised by what people say they achieve in their spare time, putting in four or five hours a day in front of the TV to keep the national averages up. (McEwan, 2005, page 66)

There have certainly been some alarming surveys into reading habits. A UK study in 2005 showed that 27 per cent of Britons never read a book at all; a further 7 per cent would only ever
read a book on holiday (BML, 2005). A 2008 study in Germany showed that 25 per cent of the population never read a book (Stiftung Lesen, 2008). The trend there is for fewer books to be read each year, with an increase in those reading 1 to 5 books a year (44 per cent compared to 38 per cent in 2000) and a decrease in those reading 11 or more books a year (28 per cent compared to 34 per cent in 2000).

The statistics regarding reading habits have to be approached with some caution. For example, general questions regarding reading do not necessarily reveal the full picture. Polls taken in the Netherlands in 1975 and 2000 revealed the same percentage (54 per cent) of people had read books for pleasure in the previous month. By contrast a diary study showed that the percentage reading for at least a quarter of an hour in the period of one week had fallen from 49 per cent to 31 per cent over the same period (Knulst and Van den Broek, 2003).

An international time use study, with comparisons of data across five countries (Southerton et al., 2007), confirmed that the time spent on reading in the Netherlands was indeed in decline but that there remained high levels of participation (90 per cent in 1995). The study covered the reading of all printed material, not only books but also newspapers and magazines, and concentrated on reading as a primary activity (not for work or education). For both France and the UK, the results were different to the Netherlands. In both countries there was an increase in the time spent reading for all printed materials; and an increase in the participation rates for reading books. Overall, however, as in the Netherlands, participation in all forms of reading had declined: in France from 44 per cent (1975) to 35 per cent (1998); in the UK from 66 per cent (1975) to 58 per cent (2000). Focusing on reading books, the study concluded that the amount of time spent reading differed according to the level of education and by gender (women read more than men). In France, for example, single households read more than other households and those with young children read less.

**National differences**

Participation in reading varies across Europe by country and region. When examining reading books for reasons other than for work or study (Skaliotis, 2002), the overall average for the EU in 2001 was 45 per cent – the highest averages were found in Sweden (72 per cent), Finland (66 per cent) and the United Kingdom (63 per cent). By contrast the lowest averages were found in Portugal (15 per cent) and Belgium (23 per cent). A later study, in 2007 (Eurobarometer, 2007), asked a different question, covering all forms of book reading. The proportion of people who had read five or more books a year was highest in Sweden (60 per cent), Denmark (56 per cent) and the UK (55 per cent); the proportion of people who had read no books at all in the previous year was highest in Malta (54 per cent), Portugal (49 per cent) and Cyprus (43 per cent).

Reading habits vary across Europe for a variety of reasons, which include reading culture, availability of books, library and educational resources, levels of education, and national income. There are apparent differences in reading between Northern and Southern Europe, with lower levels in Mediterranean countries. What factors can explain these differences?

The general way people organise their day and use their time is similar across countries, although some differences can be noted. Lunch breaks, for example, are longer in the Mediterranean countries, particularly in France, than elsewhere, with the result that the amount of leisure time is shorter. The Finnish have an hour more leisure time than the French and the Italians. (Eurostat Pocketbook, page 149)

In Greece there are fairly low levels of both book and newspaper readership, owing to a variety of factors which include the Mediterranean climate, the relatively recent growth in higher education, and the undeveloped library sector (Banou and Phillips, 2008).

How else can reading be measured? The sale of books is one other possible measure and the number of books bought per capita can be examined by country. But other factors must be borne in mind, including library usage, second-hand purchases, and the circulation of books (passed on to friends and family). In the UK the evidence is...