



Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau

Reading: Time

Reading in the Netherlands



Summary

Background and problem definition

The amount of time the Dutch spend reading in their leisure time has fallen over recent decades. This decline in reading time contrasts starkly with the positive personal and social benefits that can be derived from reading according to lots of research. Accordingly, the decline in reading is regarded as a worrying trend. Government policy has for decades focused on promoting reading.

The growth in new devices, such as e-readers, tablets and smartphones, as well as in digital media (including social media) has also changed the way people read. This study describes the reading behaviour of the Dutch and traces trends in reading over the last ten years. The ongoing digitalisation and the rise of new media begs the question of whether this has put further pressure on reading or whether these developments have created new opportunities for reading.

In this report, 'reading' refers in the first instance to the traditional text-based media: books, newspapers, magazines, free door-to-door publications and other media (e.g. folders). As well as the original, printed form, our study also includes the digital variants of these text-based media. Second, we also include the use of modern text media which can only be read on screen, such as teletext and *born-digital* news sites and news apps, as well as other specific information on the Internet. All these text-based media together constitute an indicator for total reading.

To investigate trends in Dutch reading behaviour over the period 2006-2016, data were drawn from the regularly held long-term Time Use Survey (TBO), while data from the 2013 and 2015 editions of the Media:Time study were used to provide a detailed picture of reading in the digital media landscape. How many people read, and how much, what, how and when do they read? Who are the readers (on paper and screen) and who are the non-readers? The study also looked at other activities and how reading relates to them: to what extent is reading combined and/or interchanged with other activities, and what differences are there in this regard between reading on paper and reading from a screen? The study also looked at the influence of time pressure on reading behaviour.

Reduction in reading time due to decline in number of readers

Since the first edition of the Time Use Survey (TBO) in 1975, a steady decline has been recorded in the amount of time the Dutch spend reading (in terms of reading as a main activity during people's free time). This decline has continued over the last decade. It is caused mainly by a reduction in the share of people who read at all during the course of a week; the time that people who do read actually spend reading has hardly changed. The share of

readers fell sharply between 2006 and 2011 (from 90% to 79%), and this downward trend continued between 2011 and 2016, albeit at a slower rate (from 79% to 72%).

The reduction in the share of readers between 2006 and 2011 occurs across the whole spectrum of traditional text media (books, newspapers, magazines, etc.), but affects magazines and newspapers particularly. The share of magazine readers halved over the period, while the time spent reading magazines reduced by more than half. The share of people reading magazines and newspapers fell further between 2011 and 2016, but stabilised for books. The share of readers fell among both men and women in all the periods studied, though did level off somewhat for women between 2011 and 2016.

The share of readers is higher in the older than the younger population in all years studied. Over the whole period 2006-2016, there was an especially sharp fall in the share of readers among those aged under 35. There were no notable differences in the share of readers by education in 2006. The share of readers fell among those with low and intermediate education between 2006 and 2011, but not among those with high education; this led to a gap between those with low and high education. The share of readers fell by roughly the same amount in all education groups between 2011 and 2016, so that the educational differences remained in 2016: the higher the education level, the greater the share of readers.

On-screen reading supplements rather than replaces reading on paper

The reading material available has changed over the last decade: as well as originally printed text media (books, magazines, newspapers), which are now available both on paper and in digital format, many digital and online text media are now also available. How do these new text media fit into overall reading patterns?

Out of the average of 50 minutes that the Dutch spent reading each day in 2015, the majority was spent reading newspapers (16 minutes), followed by books (12 minutes). Magazines followed at some distance (5 minutes), and were overtaken in terms of time use by reading information on the Internet (7 minutes) and on news sites/news apps (6 minutes). The remaining time was spent reading free house-to-house magazines (1 minute), other media (2 minutes) and teletext (1 minute). Given all the screen-based devices that are available for people to use today, it can no longer be simply assumed that people read from paper.

Nonetheless, the majority of the 50 minutes average that the Dutch spent reading each day in 2015 was spent reading from paper (31 minutes). Though this still represents a slight fall from the 36 minutes recorded in 2013. Paper still dominates for reading magazines, followed by newspapers and books. Screen-reading is mostly devoted to media which have no paper-based equivalent (teletext, news sites/news apps, online information). The most widely used devices for screen-reading are computers (pc and laptop), tablets and smartphones.

Who are the paper-readers and who has embraced screen-reading? The total group of readers (83% of Dutch people read during the course of a week in 2015) was divided into a portion who only read on paper (30%), a large portion who combine reading on paper with reading from a screen (49%) and a portion who only read from screens (21%). The share of

people who read from both paper and screens is the same for men and women (49%). More female readers only read from paper (35%) than only from screens (16%), while for men the division is equal: a quarter only read on paper and a quarter only from screens. A high proportion of readers aged over 65 (55%) only read from paper, compared with 16% of young adult readers (20-34 years). A relatively high proportion of this latter group (40%) only read from screens, and a similar pattern is found for teenagers (36%). Readers aged 35-64 years relatively often combine reading from paper with reading from screens. The higher someone's education level, the less they read only from paper and the more they combine reading from paper with screen-reading. As well as these socio-demographic characteristics, affinity with technology (measured using Rogers' *adopter* typology) is a significant predictor of how people read. The chance that someone will read only from paper is substantially higher for *laggards* (people who are relatively late in purchasing or using new technology; 31%) than for the *early majority* (24%) and *early adopters* (22%), who purchase and use new technology relatively early. By contrast, the probability of being a 'screen-only' reader is at least twice as great for *innovators* (a small group with great affinity for technology; 32%) as for the *late majority* (13%) or the *laggards* (16%). Digital skills also play a role. The low-skilled are most likely to read only from paper during the course of a week (30%), compared both with people with average skills (23%) and the high-skilled (23%). Those with average skills stand out in combining paper and screen-reading (58%).

Multitasking and fragmentation of reading

The ongoing digitalisation and perceived busyness of everyday life frequently gives rise to concerns about the more qualitative aspects of reading. It is argued, for example, that people more often combine reading with other activities, or interrupt reading more often because other things demand their immediate attention. This could disrupt their concentration and mean they are less able to remember what they read or understand it less well (cognitive) or are less able to become absorbed in and enjoy what they are reading (affective).

Of the 50 minutes that the Dutch spent reading each day on average in 2015 (books, newspapers, magazines, free house-to-house magazines or teletext, news sites/news apps and other online information), 18 minutes were spent reading without doing other general activities at the same time, such as eating, household tasks or travelling (single-tasking). People spent 13 minutes reading in combination with other general (non-media) activities (multitasking), while reading combined with other media activities (media-multitasking) accounted for almost 20 minutes. These proportions were virtually the same in 2013, suggesting that there has been no increase in combining reading with other activities. Single-tasking is most common when reading from paper, accounting for 43% of time spent on this type of reading in 2015, compared with 26% of the time spent reading from a screen. Multitasking occurs to roughly the same extent for reading from paper (24% of reading time) and reading from screens (29%). The biggest share of media-multitasking occurs for screen-reading – around 45% of reading time – compared with a third of the time spent reading from paper.

It was not possible in this study to perform a detailed analysis of the effects of (media-)multitasking, but we do find indications that the more people engage in (media-)multitasking when reading, the less they report that they are absorbed by what they read. To obtain a picture of the fragmentation of reading behaviour, we looked at the number of periods of uninterrupted reading (reading episodes) and how long these periods lasted. For the moment, an analysis of the reading episodes provides little reason to conclude that reading is becoming a more superficial activity.

Influence of time pressure on reading

To gain an impression of the role that time pressure and other leisure time use may play in relation to reading, the Dutch population aged 13 years and older was subdivided into four groups. First, there is the group of non-readers (17% of the population), i.e. people who in the week-long diary they kept during the Media:Time study did not report a single episode of ten minutes spent reading. The remaining 83% reported at least one reading episode in their diaries. This group was split into three roughly equal subgroups based on the amount of times spent reading: light readers (spending an average of 1.5 hours per week reading), medium readers (more than 5 hours per week on average) and fervent readers (an average of 14.5 hours per week). During the week studied in the Media:Time study, the general time use of non-readers did not differ essentially from that of the three reader groups. A week comprises 168 hours and, unsurprisingly, the fervent readers have the most free time during this period, at 50 hours. However, it is not the case that non-readers have the least free time. Less time spent reading is associated mainly with pressure from other obligations such as working and studying: the more someone works or studies, the less they read in their free time. Care and household tasks appear to impinge much less on the opportunities to read, and there are no major differences between the four groups in the time spent sleeping and on care (both personal and medical care). The four groups also spend roughly the same amount of time travelling each week.

The groups of readers/non-readers do differ in terms of their media usage. The light readers spend 3% of their total media time reading; the medium readers 8% and the fervent readers 21%. The non-readers spend 21% of their media time per day on communication, compared with 10% for the fervent readers. The fervent readers spend a smaller proportion of their media time on watching media content (32%) than the medium readers (37%) and light readers (40%) and than the non-readers (37%). Listening also occupies a higher proportion (roughly a third) of the total media time of non-readers, light and medium readers, compared with 29% of the media time of fervent readers.

A multivariate explanatory analysis provides an insight into the influence of various characteristics on reading. Women are more often readers than men, but this difference disappears after controlling for differences in time pressure. This suggests that men are more often in the non-readers group due to greater time pressure. The likelihood of reading rises sharply with age. However, time pressure alone does not explain the differences between

the age groups; the greater probability of being a non-reader in the younger age groups is not explained by possibly greater (perceived) time pressure in these groups. When it comes to education level, people with high education are substantially more likely to read than low-educated people. This is not affected by (perceived) time pressure, suggesting that the difference between people with low and high education is not caused by differences in time pressure between these groups. To summarise, time pressure influences who reads and who does not, but with the exception of the difference between men and women, provides little or no explanation for differences in whether or not people read. However, this is only half the story. The other half is concerned with predicting the amount of time that people who do read will spend on this activity. This shows that female readers spend slightly less time reading than male readers. One striking finding is that few if any differences can be detected in the time spent reading by readers in different age groups. The difference between the younger and older generations is thus due almost entirely to the fact that the share of readers in the younger age groups is so much lower. Finally, the reading time of readers with high education is higher than that of readers with low education. This educational difference in reading is thus a combination of a higher share of readers and the longer time spent reading by readers with high education.

The continuing downward trend in the share of readers, especially in the younger half of the population, in combination with the many studies showing the positive benefits of reading and reading skills, is a call to action. Based on the results of this study, intensification of the policy to promote reading is warranted across the board. It is up to all parties involved – government, science, the private sector and citizens themselves – to give tangible form to this intensification.