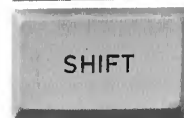


**Books and Literacy**  
*a response to new developments*



4 a s d f



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**Books and Literacy**  
*a response to new developments*

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**International Conference, 26 - 29 October 1987**  
**Amsterdam, the Netherlands, organized by the**  
**Ministry of Welfare, Health and Cultural Affairs**  
**in cooperation with the Dutch Language Union.**

Rijswijk, June 1989



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Dear reader,

From 26 to 29 October 1987 my Ministry had the honour of hosting a conference entitled "Books and literacy: a response to new developments". The conference, which was organised in collaboration with the Dutch Language Union, was one of the events held to mark Amsterdam's designation as "Cultural Capital of Europe" for 1987.

The 90 or so participants in the conference, most of whom came from countries in the European Community, drew up a number of recommendations on national and international policy with a view to improving reading skills and encouraging people to read more. The recommendations include a zero VAT-rating on books, fixed book prices and measures to promote the production and translation of books by and for minorities. You

will find these recommendations in this booklet, together with a general report on the conference. Due attention has been devoted to the difficult subject of the relationship between the audio-visual media and the printed word.

I am convinced that the results of the Amsterdam conference will form the basis for the further debate in international forums.

I should like to thank all those involved in the publication of this booklet, which I take pleasure in recommending to you.

The Director

Minister for  
Welfare, Health  
and Cultural Affairs



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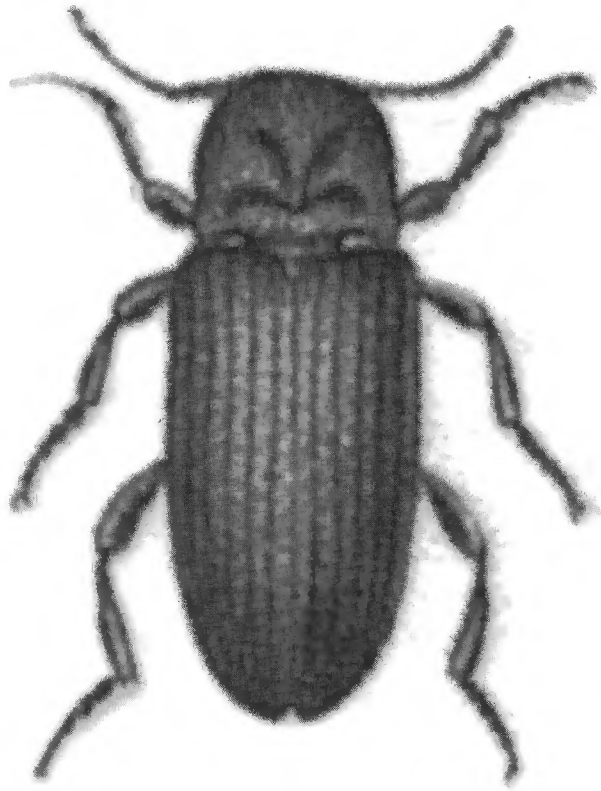
International Conference 'Books and Literacy:  
a response to new developments'.  
26 - 29 October 1987 — Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

F i n a l  
r e p o r t

Books and Literacy / Final report

8

H.D. Tjeenk Willink



## 1 Introduction

The conference 'Books and Literacy: a response to new developments', was held in Amsterdam from 26 to 29 October 1987. It was a follow-up to the first conference on books held in Arles, which brought together all those involved in the creation and perpetuation of books: writers, publishers, translators, librarians and policy makers. Representatives of the above professionals often have reservations concerning one another. They met once again in Amsterdam to discuss two questions:

- a The book is an inextricable part of European culture. It constitutes the perfect medium for the publication of ideas and thoughts. The question is can books continue to play this role?
- b In order to function in society, to participate in one's cultural surroundings and form independent judgements it is important to know how to read. The question is how can reading and the quality of reading be promoted?

Common points of departure do not rule out opposing interests. Cultural objectives, economic trends and national interests can be at odds with one other. It is this very confrontation and where possible the reconciliation of such interests which is the rationale of conferences. The promotion of reading can serve both cultural and economic interests. The scope for confrontation and reconciliation has been exploited more fully. One possibility would be to have several brief papers written on one particular subject, for example books and media. A further possibility, within the framework of the working groups, would be to allow parties to speak on a particular subject they are not directly involved in such as the position of translators. Opposing interests can only be reconciled when such interests are clearly formulated. This often proves to be a far from simple task.

Books are threatened from various sides: by the economic balance of power, by technological innovations, by linguistic barriers, and by the interference of authorities.

The title of the conference 'Books and Literacy: a response to new developments', refers to developments on both the supply and demand sides of the book market. Changes are affecting supply: the emergence of new media and their output requirements, the surplus of books, differentiation of the market (division into smaller markets) and concentration trends in the book sector. Changes are also affecting demand: semi-literacy (especially among ethnic minorities) and changes in leisure pursuits and purchasing power.

One of the general conclusions of the conference was that there is a shortage of data concerning these changes, for example with regard to the relationship between books and other media and reading habits. If such data are available, it is often difficult to compare them for example concerning the role of the media in various countries or the state of the book market. This lack of comparable data hampers fruitful discussion and the taking of effective measures. The lack of a European centre for media studies is therefore sorely felt.

This final report looks first of all at the main points which emerged from the papers and the discussions of the working groups, and makes certain notes and suggestions. It then examines the more general aspects of the conference. It also touches on the role of the government in the 'creation and perpetuation of books'. Finally it indicates some of the dangers that threaten international conferences. The composition of the final report, the selection of the material and the commentary are exclusively the responsibility of the rapporteur.

## 2 Various approaches and answers

A single subject can be approached in a number of ways. It is always possible to find different answers to the same questions. Various approaches emerge from the papers and various answers are formulated by the working parties and in the recommendations. There is sufficient material for many follow-up conferences.

The first subject for the conference: Books and Translations, can be approached from a financial-economic angle, can be geared to the quality of translation or seen as a power problem. These three approaches are reflected in the paper.

From a financial-economic point of view the translator stands to gain by an increase in the number of translations and a greater stake in the profits. The increase in numbers can be achieved through a reduction in price of the translated book. In order to obtain a larger proportion of the profits translators must compete with the financial interests of writers, publishers, printers and distributors. Such competition can be eased through financial support from the authorities, either directly (for example through a European fund for translations) or indirectly (for example through the abolition of VAT). Both these supportive measures are advocated by the working group.

The paper's financial-economic approach is based on the assumption that a greater amount of translated literature at a lower price will lead to greater demand. This view ignores the fact that the direct link between supply and demand has never been clearly demonstrated. It is equally uncertain whether writers and translators would be the first to profit from the abolition of VAT, however justified such abolition may be.

The paper lists the following as providing scope for improving the quality of translations: the teaching of foreign languages at secondary schools, the introduction of translation as a discipline taught at universities, greater scope for literary translators to maintain or increase their professional skills in their target languages, and the encouraging of reviewers to focus upon translation as a cultural achievement in its own right. The working group especially advocates the provision of financial support so that translators can stay in the linguistic territory of the language into which they translate.

A consequence of this plea for professionalisation is, however, the recognition of the fact that the education system, too, is directly involved in both the continued existence and the creation of literacy. The role of education in the whole chain of the production, distribution and sale of books, could provide sufficient material for a separate conference.

An indication of the limited power of translators is their position as regards copyright. In this respect they appear, in practice, to be worse off than the authors. Their socio-economic position also leaves a lot to be desired. The paper compares the advantages and disadvantages of two alternatives: putting translators on a par with employees or with entrepreneurs. In line with the climate of the eighties, the latter is advocated. At the same time it is maintained that the position of translators can only improve if they organise themselves better, for example in professional organisations. The working group accordingly urges financial and legal support for the Conseil Européen des Associations de Traducteurs, SEAT. A further proposal is the appointment by the European Community or the Council of Europe of a liaison officer or ombudsman who would 'form a link between associations of translators, national government and international governments by informing and advising all the above-mentioned parties on current developments, proceedings, initiatives etc., with regard to policy matters relating to the position of translators and translations.'

Proposals to focus on the translator as a small-scale entrepreneur with individual talent and individual aspirations could undermine awareness of the common interests of the profession as a whole. The authorities could promote such awareness by awarding professional organisations a clear individual role (e.g. with regard to copyright).

The second theme of the conference, the relation between books and modern mass media, can be described as one of contrast. However, books and the modern mass media can also be regarded as fulfilling two complementary roles. At present a lack of insight into their mutual relationship means it is only possible to hypothesize on this subject.

The paper concludes, on the basis of four differences, that there is a contrast, or competition between 'print' (whether printed or written), and AV, (all audio-visual media in which written text plays a subordinate role). The first difference concerns function: the main function of AV (particularly television) is felt to be entertainment while the main function of print is to provide information. This differentiation according to function places modern aids, such as computers, in an ambivalent light. The second difference concerns access to the original work: access to print is considered easier and more normal than in the case of AV. Furthermore, there is a difference in quality: AV focuses more than print on popular productions. Finally, a difference in the amount of supply leads to a differing allocation of time in favour of AV. Such competition between AV and print causes particular concern in view of the fact that modern society places increasing emphasis on the ability to read and write.

It is unclear, at least to me, whether these differences are of a permanent nature. This approach would seem rather to be based on assumptions and the idealisation of 'all that is printed or written' (print). Books, too, were not originally widely available, and for a great many people this situation has remained in practice unchanged. A significant percentage of the books lent by libraries belong to the category of popular literature, for example romantic fiction. Libraries sometimes have too much of a tendency to follow demand. At present there is a surplus of books being produced. Books also compete with one another and not just with AV. Modern techniques facilitate the printing of books and pamphlets, and allow them to be produced more cheaply.

The working group stressed the complementary nature of print and other modern mass media, as did Eco. This state of affairs does not rule out competition, but competition also exists within the individual media, for example television or the press. Both print and AV need improvement. They can have a positive effect on each other, for example in education. This requires awareness on the part of consumers that they do not have to be at the mercy of supply.

Insight into the relationship between the mass media and their influence on one another is still, however, extremely deficient. Amongst other things, this hampers the use of the media for the promotion of reading skills and reading as a pastime. It is due to this lack of insight and data that the most direct results are likely to be achieved through smaller, often local initiatives. Exchange of information concerning such initiatives, for example for the benefit of ethnic minorities, could prove valuable.

### Books and the book market

The third theme of the conference, the relationship between books and the book market can be described in cultural and economic terms. The cultural terms: threat to freedom of the press, a weakening of the position of books for ethnic minorities and the decline of reading are dealt with elsewhere. The economic terms relate to overproduction and stagnating sales. Both developments are connected to the increasingly short average life of books. As a result, the book sector is less and less able to reconcile its cultural role with the economic pressure of changing market factors.

According to the paper a reduction in demand is being matched by a book supply which has reached an exceptionally high level, both as far as diversity and numbers are concerned. The situation is described as one of over-production. The present output of investments force publishers to recoup investments in books in one and a half years. Large

editions are produced in the hope of reducing book prices. Publishers try to keep their earnings up by offering a wider range of titles, thus increasing the chances of a best-seller. More than ever before, a book's success is determined by the publicity surrounding its launching. It further emerges from the paper that the lack of a single fixed general book market constitutes a permanent problem. Instead there is a profusion of large, small and medium-sized submarkets, which are continually changing. Some can be defined quite precisely, others are much harder to pin down.

In order to call a halt to the over-production of titles and editions, it will be necessary to take a number of strategic measures. These will include:

- a more selective publishing policy;
- the profiling of publishers lists;
- more far-reaching agreements with consumers or groups of consumers;
- more professional assistance in marketing;
- cooperation with other media;
- the spreading of risks through sponsoring and international co-production.

Whereas the paper places responsibility primarily with the book sector itself, the working party, in contrast, lays emphasis on the need for government measures such as the protection of copyright, a standard book price and export subsidies.

It would be worthwhile to investigate further the various sectors of the book market, the parties operating on it and the books which are being threatened most. Strategic measures could then be taken accordingly.

The paper also sketches the problems experienced by the book sector in finding a market.

Apart from a relatively small percentage of devoted readers, the sixties and seventies saw a rise in the number of customers. However, the financial and economic situation of recent years has reversed this trend, the most important reason for not buying books being the expense. Nearly half the independent booksellers in the Netherlands are operating at a loss or at best breaking even. Lack of shop space forces booksellers to select from the extensive supply of titles available. Turnover and profits also determine the choice of books made available to the customer.

Publishers and booksellers are still insufficiently aware of the fact that the latter constitute an invaluable source of market knowledge. Neither booksellers nor publishers have the professional competence to tap this source of knowledge and to translate it into concrete production development, sales techniques and promotion. Analysis of individual bookshop records shows that sales outlets which consistently profile themselves to their markets stand a considerably better chance of success than their more passive counterparts.

The working group placed emphasis on combating the notion that books are expensive, on freeing books from VAT, on improving the image of books as compared with other media and on training booksellers to provide their customers with information.

One cannot help wondering, however, whether sales problems are really directly related to a declining demand due to reduced purchasing power or a poor image of the book, and are not in fact much more likely to relate to outdated business practice and the nature of the books on offer. Much more use could undoubtedly be made of booksellers' marketing experience. However, information of this type concerns information on micro developments which cannot replace the information which is needed concerning macro developments on the book market. A follow-up conference could look at the types of information (both macro and micro) and information systems needed to be able to respond promptly to new developments on the book market.

The fourth subject of the conference, the promotion of reading, comprises reading skills, scope for reading and reading for pleasure. The paper emphasizes that before reading can be promoted it is necessary to build up a profile of the potential reader (data concerning reading skill, motivation for reading and reading preference) and to be aware of the books that are available, whether at sales outlets, libraries, schools or privately owned. Research can also reveal the specific conditions affecting the reading habits of various target groups, including minorities. The results of such research could lead to modification of the books available, the removal of obstacles to free choice (for example classification of books according to theme rather than genre) and abolition of classification into popular novels and serious novels.

Audio-visual media can also help promote reading. The authors of this paper find no proof for the claim that the use of media other than books negatively affects reading. The simultaneous use of media can in fact prove particularly successful with regard to the promotion of reading. This holds true not only for print media but also for audio-visual media which can increase the scope for the transfer of knowledge and thus positively affect reading.

When dealing with information on readers and book supplies I believe that it is important to bear in mind the reasons for which such information is required, i.e. increasing reading skills, the scope for reading and reading as a pastime. For purposes such as these it is also necessary to have access to information on developments within a certain category of readers over the longer term. At present such information is generally lacking. Nor are the information needs of the publishing and bookselling sector necessarily geared to the experience of the reading public or the way in which they wish to select books.

Reading skills are becoming increasingly essential to the individual if he is to cope with present-day life and be able to form judgements. However, semi-literacy and illiteracy are still to be found in all EC member states. The paper notes that primary education still places emphasis on technical reading skills. However, the objective of language and literature teaching is broader, namely to encourage people leaving school to read in their own time, to choose their own reading material for this purpose, to assimilate the reading material in their own way, and to be aware of the usefulness and if possible the pleasure of reading. This means that time will have to be set aside for private reading at school and that a variety of books will have to be provided.

It is debatable whether the observation that technical reading skills are still central in education does sufficient justice to the developments in a number of countries in recent years whereby great importance is attached to communicative skills for example. The manner in which the book sector responds to these educational developments could form the subject of a conference.

According to the paper, libraries are one of the most important links between technical reading skills and practical scope for reading. The importance of libraries to reading habits is evident from Danish data and other sources. In 1965 an act came into force in Denmark whereby every municipality was obliged to establish and maintain a public library with a children's section. The lending of children's books increased dramatically after the introduction of this measure. More important, however, is the fact that when these children grew up they still read more than other people.

An experience such as this could easily lead to the assumption that reading habits hinge on legislative and funding problems, on the mandatory maintenance of libraries for children and adults and the funds necessary to run them. The paper indicates that in the case of reading for pleasure an important role is played by the book sector itself (in the form of the children's book fair and flexible outlets), information on books in other media, level of education, and, most importantly,



the attitude of parents and teachers. If grandparents and parents are fond of reading and are familiar with the world of books, the first step has been taken on the way to active reading habits on the part of children.

In its paper, the working group drafted numerous recommendations, concerning research into reading behaviour, education, the availability of, and access to books, and publicity on books and reading. Those interested are referred to the working group's report.

### 3 Influence

Conferences are based on the premise that developments can be influenced. If this were not the case, they would be meaningless. Instruments for influence include public awareness, participants' initiatives, and government measures. A combination of these instruments is usually involved.

In his paper, Umberto Eco set the tone for a public discussion stating that it was important not to fight false enemies and not to support false friends. It is not a question of setting written against visual communication. The problem is how to improve both. Illiteracy applies to many media. The real question at issue is how to tackle a number of factors threatening the world of books and the cultural heritage which books represent. Eco mentioned five such factors.

Firstly, books are threatened by books. Stagnation will always result from the excessive production of information. Secondly, books remain expensive items when compared with other instruments of communication such as television. Reduction in the price of books, for example by freeing them from VAT, would encourage publication and circulation, but at the same time would cause them to increase in number. Thirdly, new technologies compete with one another. All publishers are aware of the extent to which the technology of photocopying undermines their interests. It is also creating problems for the reader. Photocopying makes it easier to possess books, but it is not making it easier to read them. Fourthly, modern production methods (wood) means that books do not have a long life. One possibility would be to reprint books every few years. However, this would be dependent on market factors and public demand. The only way of saving other books would be to set up special committees to consider such cases. The power of such committees would be enormous. Fifthly, illiteracy is on the decline throughout the entire Third World. Children are learning to read and write, but many lack the purchasing power to buy books. Who will select books for them?

It is a pity that these developments and dilemmas could not be considered at the plenary meetings. A follow-up conference could be held on these subjects.

In his opening speech the Minister for Welfare, Health and Cultural Affairs, Elco Brinkman, also expressed his concern regarding various negative developments which pose a threat to books. However, such developments should not be accepted as an autonomous process. Targeted measures are required. In this context, the minister formulated three requests to the conference:

- the identification of the central problems;
- recommendations for concrete, practical solutions;
- the indication of steps to be taken by the book sector itself and all involved in the promoting of reading with a view to improving the standard of reading as a whole.

The minister underlined the public responsibility for culture. The authorities have traditionally created a general framework in order to allow the book sector to fulfil its social role. The government will have to continue to do this. At the same time it is realistic to assume that reducing the government's role is a general practical aim.

To a certain extent the participants at the conference were able to respond to these requests. However, the discussion and recommendations placed a strong emphasis on the drafting of communal recommendations to governments, and only to a

much lesser extent on the taking of joint initiatives. Almost no-one dealt with the question of what the market itself can do and the nature of the contribution to be made by the private bodies represented. The fact that government initiatives lay behind the conferences in Arles and Amsterdam will have contributed to this. Such a state of affairs more or less provokes recommendations aimed at the authorities. Conferences also constitute an instrument in the hands of the organising government bodies themselves.

The recommended government measures can be divided into a number of categories:

- tax measures (particularly a zero VAT rate);
- statutory measures (particularly those aimed at establishing a balance between cultural and economic interests);
- education (particularly aimed at encouraging individuals to reach their own decisions on the products of various media);
- research (particularly concerning the relationship between books and other media);
- other financial measures (particularly with regard to translations and translators).

These measures largely conform with early proposals, including those originating from government bodies themselves.

It is interesting to note that many recommendations are geared to the supply side of the book market, since those very ministries concerned with this field were not represented at the conference: the Ministries of Economic Affairs and of Finance. It appears that in both the art sector and the new technology sector, government measures to promote demand (on the part of readers) often prove far more effective than those designed to promote supply (on the part of publishers). A greater number of cheaper books does not necessarily mean that people will read more. The government has traditionally possessed a large number of instruments with regard to demand: education and training (for example public libraries) but also purchasing power. However, many authorities are confronted with the need for cuts. Education, training schemes and benefit payments are rarely spared. On the contrary, it is within these sectors that those sections of the population who have the greatest problems with reading skills and lack, the scope for reading and reading for pleasure are to be found. It is therefore essential that clear choices be made now as to the nature of the demand to be promoted: the category of readers or potential readers and the books to be targeted. This also raises the question as to the extent of government involvement in production, distribution and consumption processes with regard to cultural products including books.

#### **4 The role of the government**

An analytical distinction can be made between general and specific cultural policy. 'General cultural policy concerns individual freedom of expression. Specific cultural policy concerns collectively appreciated forms of expression and intellectual products. Whereas the ideal of freedom of expression in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has led to a gradual reduction of the government's role as assessor, the civilised ideal of arts, science and education calls upon the government to take active steps'<sup>1</sup>. General and specific cultural policy are directly connected, certainly where the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of the press is at stake. The objective of that guarantee is, after all, not only to ensure that individuals can say what they wish, but that individuals actually do say what they wish. This is the main reason for government interference with books and the book market. 'In a way that no other medium can, books are able to convey knowledge, facts, ideas and subjective fiction in a profound and complete manner. It is already possible – and technological developments are making it increasingly possible – to produce, cost effectively, editions of 1,000 or even fewer books. In other words, anyone who has something to say can use books as a means of spreading

their ideas. However, books cannot exist without readers. Education and cultural policy are prerequisites for reading. A more effective role can be played by libraries in supplementing education. Libraries provide a culture medium for willing readers, making people receptive to books.'<sup>2</sup> At present, too little use is made of the scope for opening lines of communication between libraries and schools and the actual book supply in book shops. Many libraries are confronted with difficult choices between the need to increase the number of books lent, investment in costly information technology and forceful policy geared to promoting reading. This is undoubtedly a subject which merits a conference.

The government has always had a special involvement in literature. In contrast to other forms of cultural expression, the market influence is considerable. In various countries there are moves to reduce government involvement and to give more play to market forces. This trend could prove to be at odds with the conference recommendations for more government measures. However, it is debatable whether it is still possible to speak of government and market as separate entities. In present-day society, government and the market have become closely intertwined. The government influences market developments in numerous ways, sometimes directly but primarily indirectly. This does not detract from the fact that a distinction is made, and must continue to be made, between two different regulatory principles: the principle of political/bureaucratic determination of needs and that of a self-regulating market geared to supply and demand. Greater understanding is needed of the operation, the restriction and the effects of these two principles and their mutual relation. The government should simultaneously gear corrective measures to both the market and its own bodies, thus preventing the creation of impenetrable commercial/bureaucratic networks. Signals emanating from new developments are often slow to penetrate both the market and bureaucratic institutions. The results can be a failure by both parties to promote pluralism and disseminate culture.

Requests for government action are increasingly aimed at the European authorities, and this was, quite rightly, also the case during the conference. European unification is unthinkable without a cultural identity. Linguistic barriers prevent nations from understanding one another's cultural expression, especially books. More translations are therefore needed. National borders transect areas which share the same written and spoken language; states must gear their national policy to one another. The growth of multinational media enterprises increasingly reduces the numbers of those responsible for decisions on the supply of cultural products. This trend must be stopped. However, an appeal to the European authorities can also create problems. The European Community remains primarily an economic community, centering on the free movement of goods, services and persons. This is not necessarily in the interests of cultural expression. This applies particularly to cultural expression aimed at or produced by ethnic minorities, small linguistic areas etc.

Besides internationalisation there is evidence of regionalisation in a number of areas. At regional and local level it becomes easier to see the consequences of social developments for individuals; it is easier to tailor solutions to specific problems and to analyse relationships. At regional and local level it is often also easier to coordinate the policies of the various governmental and semi-governmental bodies. From a technical and economic point of view, small-scale projects are forming less and less of a problem. The conference therefore advocated not only international and national measures, but also local initiatives: cooperation between schools, libraries and booksellers and the promotion of public libraries and educational projects. However, proposals that regional and local bodies take measures can also create problems since the latter are too rarely represented at international conferences.

'Every measure taken by the government is the result of sometimes lengthy processes of political opinion-forming and decision-taking. We may speak of government responsibilities, but at stake are values which people would like to translate into measures in order to give them a firm basis in public administration. The provision of such a basis must invariably bring about a process of institutionalisation without which ordered life in a modern society is impossible, but which, at the other time, forms a considerable barrier for the progress of such life — a dilemma.'<sup>3</sup> This dilemma confronts all those 'who are involved in the creation and perpetuation of books'. Books represent cultural values which must also be firmly rooted in public administration. Institutionalisation is needed. A component in this process is regular conferences. However, institutionalisation also threatens conferences. The number of participants directly involved in the creation and perpetuation of books is steadily shrinking, while their professional representatives and officials are on the increase. Examination of the lists of participants of the conferences in Arles and in Amsterdam reveals a shift. In Amsterdam there were fewer writers, publishers and booksellers. As the contacts between authorities and professional organisations increase, individual functions and responsibilities become more blurred. Governments increasingly view the world through an expert's eye. The number of officials coming from specialist organisations is increasing, and their background is reflected in their work. They have views of what is good or bad, beautiful or ugly, promising or only a temporary deviation. In turn, professional organisations increasingly take into account the procedures and provisions to which officials are tied. They increasingly have secretariats which operate like bureaucratic organisations. Since there is a vast number of organisations and committees, it is frequently necessary to apply to the same persons. Personal contacts in the policy circuit threaten to become more important than relations with 'the field'. Questions of substance are given bureaucratic answers: new organisations, new procedures, new consultation. This threatens to obscure new developments, problems and solutions.

Each follow-up conference — after Arles in 1985 and Amsterdam in 1987 it will be Spain's turn in 1989 — is therefore confronted with two questions. One of course is: 'Have the recommendations of the previous conference now been realised and if so is adjustment necessary?' But the most important question is 'What is the real problem and whose problem is it?'

**H. D. Tjeenk Willink**  
**May 1988**

<sup>1</sup>) Advisory Report on Cultural Legislation, Social and Cultural Planning Office, cahier 1986 no. 52, Rijswijk, September 1986, pp. 25 ff.

<sup>2</sup>) Book and Book Market, paper for the conference on 'Books and Literacy, a response to new developments',

<sup>3</sup>) J. Kassies, 'Bij wijze van epiloog' (By Way of Epilogue) in: 'Kunnen Politici veranderen' (Can Politicians Change), The Hague, 1987, p. 49 (Reports of the Government Commissioner for the Reorganisation of the Civil Service).



International Conference 'Books and Literacy:  
a response to new developments'.  
26 - 29 October 1987 — Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

W o r d s ,  
w o r d s ,  
w o r d s .

Words, words, words.



Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to be able to say a few words of welcome before the Minister for Welfare, Health and Cultural Affairs opens the Conference.

I should like to thank the Minister for the trust which he has shown in me by appointing me Chairman of the Conference. It is in this capacity that I have the privilege and pleasure to welcome you to the beautiful city of Amsterdam, which has been designated this year's Cultural Capital of Europe.

Amsterdam has more than just a proud history; more than just memories of the days when it was the capital of a great maritime power: it also surges with the vitality of a truly modern city which is applying model solutions to its various problems.

The theme of this week's Conference is 'Books and culture: meeting new challenges'. It has been organised jointly by the Ministry of Welfare, Health and Cultural Affairs and the Dutch Language Union, with financial support from the European Community. In some measure, this Conference is a follow-up to the conference on books held in Arles on the initiative of Jack Lang, at that time the French Minister for Cultural Affairs.

I am delighted that so many eminent people from the world of science and culture have accepted our invitation. It would be impossible for me to name them all, but permit me to extend a special welcome to Monsieur René André. Monsieur André has stepped in for His Excellency Signor Carlo Ripa di Meana, who unfortunately was prevented from attending.

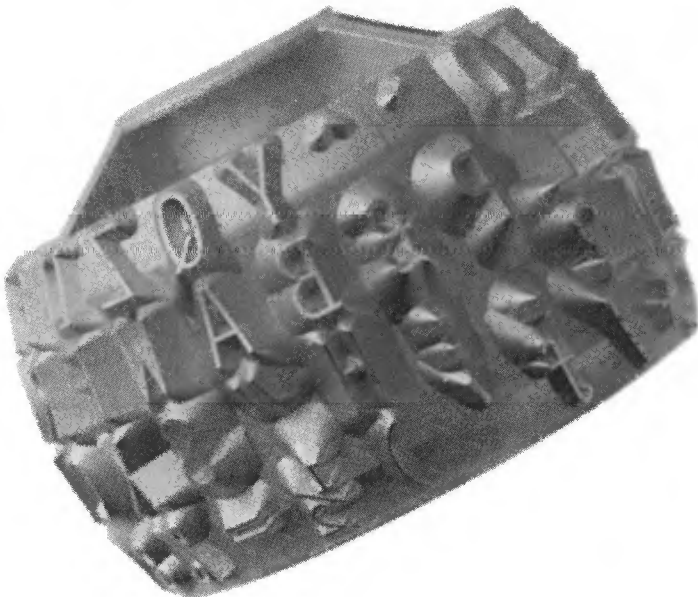
Please allow me to thank some of our contributors in advance. I should like to express my gratitude to Professor Umberto Eco for kindly agreeing to give us an introductory talk. I also wish to offer my sincere thanks to the authors of the Conference documents which have prepared the ground for our discussions, and to the Chairpersons of the working groups, Ms Portnoy, Monsieur Escarpit, Mr Mayer and Mr Stubbs, as well as their rapporteurs.

The knowledge and experience brought together at this Conference bodes well for its success. I consider myself fortunate indeed to be able to experience the emotional and intellectual energy which this Conference will undoubtedly generate.

Before giving the floor to the Minister for Welfare, Health and Cultural Affairs, who will deliver the opening speech, may I say once again how very pleased I am to see you all.

Thank you.





Ladies and Gentlemen,

The information revolution is gathering momentum. What was new yesterday is now obsolete and has been superseded by yet further innovations. Only the actual process of production and adaptation to the market slows down this trend, so that innovations reach the consumer in fits and starts, and with some delay. What is striking here is the apparent ease with which the consumer keeps pace with developments. Once we have had a little time to accustom ourselves to an innovation, it rapidly acquires such a patina of ordinariness that we can scarcely believe it was merely a figment of the futuristic imagination not long ago.

But this process of adaptation and flux means that precious little thought is given to the drawbacks of these innovations. Both between the wars and since, there have always been writers who have drawn attention to the disadvantages involved. One need only think of the Frankfurt School; of Postman; of Steiner, currently the focus of considerable interest in the Netherlands.

One of the disadvantages of the information revolution is the breakneck speed with which information floods through the brain, failing to leave any lasting impression. Issues requiring debate are not discussed at sufficient length or in sufficient detail, except in small groups. The rapid availability of information means that the debate on how society can best make use of the information revolution and place it in a worthwhile and meaningful cultural perspective is unable to keep pace. Our urge to keep abreast of developments robs us of time to reflect on the phenomenon itself. Yet, paradoxically, we can only keep genuinely abreast of developments if we allow ourselves time to reflect. And the tragedy of this paradox might well lie in the fact that the very modern media which offer such a wealth of opportunities avoid the big issues such as the future of culture and hence the way in which we can bestow meaning upon our existence.

The development of the media and the information revolution in society have inspired a number of dissertations on contemporary culture, some pessimistic, others optimistic. They range from the gloom of Habermas to the light-heartedness of Toffler, taking in the now rather dated Marshall McLuhan on the way. Neither extreme attracts me. Both positive and negative possibilities are open to us. Above all, we must not simply accept the developments as an autonomous process, basing our attitude upon a type of pragmatic cynicism which is actually a capitulation before the problems and issues at stake. It is only possible to really adapt mentally to developments if one is fully aware of the developments and exercises conscious control over them. A problem here is that information is culture, and culture is an issue of universal concern.

But information is also the product of powerful industrial complexes. The takeover battle which has just been fought between two publishing companies in the Netherlands demonstrates just how precarious the balance is between the public interest in cultural matters and the private interests of industry, both here and in the rest of the world.

Perhaps, by virtue of its newness, the technological information society exercises so great a fascination that, while people may **hear** that the culture of books and writing is being threatened by a culture based upon electronic media and television-viewing, and may even acknowledge this fact, they fail to truly **comprehend** it.

I would not have expressed these sentiments a year ago. Yet, I was aware of certain negative trends, which were serious enough to invite detailed investigation.

Doom-laden prophecies of rising illiteracy could be heard on all sides. But survey results gave a more cheering picture. In particular, all the surveys confirmed that there was no question of reading being supplanted by television. However, continuing negative reports from bookselling and publishing circles abroad are now being confirmed by the latest research in the Netherlands. I fear that the malaise is, indeed, international in scope.

Some of the negative trends threatening books are: the crisis on the book market, mergers, concentration of a variety of media in a few hands, competition from the new media, use of more transient media, and the undermining of copyright. Meanwhile the need for general policy instruments such as a fixed book price, copyright and special value added tax rates is not universally appreciated. Another foreseeable problem is the spread of illiteracy, owing largely to the linguistic difficulties facing growing immigrant communities. You will have no difficulty in adding to this list. In many cases a number of different factors are at work simultaneously, and their mutually reinforcing effects tend to cause a downward spiral in the fortunes of books as a medium.

When a person loses his memory, he loses his personality. Books represent the long-term memory of a culture; if the information contained in books is not accessible, or if little or no information is added to it, the culture loses its personality.

I have stressed the serious nature of the situation. Given the fast and furious development of the information society, we cannot predict what the future will hold. I therefore hope that this conference will succeed in forming as accurate as possible a picture of the problems involved and putting forward realistic responses to tomorrow's challenges. In so doing, it is important to bear in mind the responsibilities of the government, which represents society, and the even more vital responsibilities of the book trade itself. It would be too easy an answer simply to expect governments and supranational authorities to solve all the problems. Government shares responsibility for culture, but an equal or greater responsibility for it lies with society itself and especially with a branch of industry known, not unreasonably, as the culture industry. The industrialisation of the production of culture entails a danger that the level of cultural information may decline if commercial thinking prevails over cultural responsibility. This is a natural tension within the culture industry itself, a field over which government has only very limited powers of control.

Ever since book production became an industry, governments have created general conditions to enable the industry to fulfil its social function, while seeking to keep their distance in other respects. These conditions consisted of guaranteeing the freedom of the press and providing copyright protection. They were later supplemented, in some countries at least, by the toleration or imposition of a fixed book price, a lower rate of value added tax, and other very general regulations and measures aimed at fostering favourable conditions. One of the limitations on government intervention is the strict requirement that freedom of expression be respected. It is only on the level of demand — or, to put it in rather less starkly economic terms, cultural participation — that the government can exercise a certain amount of control.

As a matter of principle, writers and translators should also be at liberty to operate as free entrepreneurs on the market. This brings us to the following point.

On the one hand, the government has a duty to foster culture. On the other hand, it is realistic to envisage an increasingly non-interventionist government.

I would like to ask you to indicate, firstly, the main problems which have arisen during discussions in each of the working groups.

Next, I would ask you to go beyond simply pointing out existing problems and to think creatively about possible practical measures. As a starting point, I would suggest that you give some thought to how you would go about solving the problems if you were in a position to do so. Try to avoid thinking of the government as being omnipotent, and assume instead that government is bound to operate within the limits I have indicated, which I believe to be realistic.

Finally, I would invite you to think carefully about the role of your partners and to put forward suggestions for initiatives which might be taken by the book trade and all those involved in promoting reading in order to improve the quality of reading matter. Here are a few of the more obvious possibilities:

General regulations laid down by the government can be both implemented and supplemented through intensive use of the instruments available by the book trade, libraries and the teaching profession. At all events, the government and those directly concerned with reading as a cultural phenomenon would probably be well-advised to cooperate, each within its own area of responsibility.

In short, the fact that the government has organised this conference is indicative of the deep concern it feels. I would ask you to put forward proposals of as concrete a nature as possible, drawing upon inspired pragmatism.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In your various capacities as experts in the fields of writing, translating, publishing, the book trade, distribution, librarianship and teaching, and representatives of the governments of certain European countries, you have been invited here to discuss the future of books in a world where the media are changing rapidly, to assess the situation from the different viewpoints of the various sectors involved, and, we hope, to put forward proposals which will ensure a healthy future for books.

Developments are taking place on an international scale. And only international cooperation and concerted efforts can offer a solution to the crisis.

It will, however, be impossible to put the remedy into practice without a higher level of public interest in the trends which are undermining our culture. Arousing the interest of the general public is another major objective of this conference.

The book conference in Arles in 1985 demonstrated that an appeal to public opinion must be made on an international scale. Thus, given Amsterdam's status as cultural capital of Europe for this year, we have seized the opportunity to issue an appeal to Europe, from this fine city with its literary culture both ancient and modern – an appeal to give books the place they deserve in an information-based culture which is both fascinating and perilous, exciting and threatening.

A culture with a future if there is a future for books.

Thank you.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

You are no doubt wondering exactly what the Dutch Language Union is, and why I have been invited here to speak on its behalf.

The Dutch Language Union is a small inter-governmental organisation set up by treaty between the Netherlands and Belgium. Dutch is after all, as you know, spoken on both sides of the border separating our two countries. The aim of the treaty is to maintain close linguistic and literary contacts between the two parts of the Dutch-speaking community and to prevent their gradually growing apart.

Considered purely as a treaty, the Language Union agreement is itself of some interest. In the first place, language and literature are unusual subjects for a treaty. There must be few other treaties whose objectives are so explicitly cultural. In other words, the social 'section' is interesting. It is also of interest that an inter-governmental organisation is involved, meaning a formally shared language policy between the two countries. This, in a sense, places the importance of the language on an equal footing with such quite different topics as river pollution, or the abolition of trade impediments between our two countries.

Secondly, the treaty is of interest because it provides for the maintenance of a permanent General Secretariat to draw up proposals for the Committee of Ministers and implement their decisions. In the general context of treaties on cultural affairs, this is a very striking and unusual provision, giving considerable political weight to the language matters in question.

The Language Union has only been in existence for a couple of years. Work on setting up its various projects began in 1984. For the time being, matters being addressed are: the spelling of Dutch; the various teaching posts abroad devoted to Dutch language and literature; grammar books and dictionaries; the use of Dutch in the media and by ethnic minorities; and more prescriptive language questions, such as the use of terminology.

In all of this, the world of book publishing and distribution also has a considerable role to play. A healthy publishing and book-selling industry assists in the intellectual development of the population and the maintenance and reinforcement of literacy. A carefully tended infrastructure for books and for literacy may be expected to have a beneficial effect on the cultural heritage of the Dutch language, both in Belgium and in the Netherlands. It is a matter of distinct cultural and economic importance, and in view of these linguistic and cultural angles, the Committee of Ministers of the Language Union have expressed the wish that moves be made within the context of the treaty towards the possible establishment of a single communal book trade within the two countries.

As General Secretary of the Language Union, I therefore have the task of working out proposals to achieve this. Because, after all, this sort of thing cannot be achieved from one day to the next, the activities of the Language Union are at present being focused on two topics in this area:

firstly, research is being undertaken into the nature and substance of factors which may foster or impede cross-border trade between Belgium and the Netherlands. This research is being carried out by the Stichting Spuurwerk, a research foundation in Amsterdam, in close cooperation with researchers in Belgium. It will be some time before the results of this research become available.

secondly, I asked the two unions in the Netherlands and in Flanders to put together a White Paper on the system of collective resale price maintenance for books in the Dutch-speaking regions. This White Paper has now been completed. The original is in Dutch, but for the benefit of the other cross-border language areas in Europe it has also been supplied with appendices and translations concerning the French and English-speaking regions. The mention of these three language areas – Dutch, English and French – outlines the wider European context of the question.

For Europe as a whole, the following is of particular importance: In essence the exploitation of a product is not limited by borders, whether geographical or cultural. The free transit of commodities across borders is therefore possible. Free markets and mass production (given the extent of the markets) allow the consumer to choose the lower possible price.

This rule does not apply to the printed information which books contain. The market for these exists primarily in the area in which the language in which they are written is spoken.

A common language is the basis for a common culture, even though there may be no unity at the state level. This means that the transmission of culture, being largely a responsibility of government, reaches across boundaries.

In 1985 the European Commission began to interest itself in the regulation of book prices within the community. In the course of these considerations, the Commission expressed, for the first time, the primary importance of recognizing the book as a cultural rather than an industrial product.

It was at the beginning of 1985 that the European Commission originally considered a community system for book prices, but by the end of that year the Commission had decided, for the time being, not to formulate any proposal for a Directive establishing such a framework. The biggest problem of price-fixing across national borders existed in French (France and Belgium), Dutch (the Netherlands and Belgium) and English (Great Britain and Ireland). The European Commission accepted that these language areas required protection for their common cultures in the form of fixed prices applying to the entire language area.

Within the wider European context, the Dutch-speaking region is just one of three cross-border language areas. The developments I have outlined are taking place in the other areas too. This is an additional reason for the Language Union's interest in the question. For these reasons I as General Secretary have asked the two national organisations of publishers and booksellers in the Netherlands and Flanders to formulate their shared points of view in the White Paper.

The two associations believe that the Dutch Language Union can play a leading part in this. Mr Andriessen of the European Commission mentioned the Dutch Language Union in 1981 and the European Commission stated in the Decision of 25 November 1981 in proceedings v.B.B.B./v.B.V.B.(60): 'The Commission is sure that the Member States concerned would not hesitate to take action to protect certain cultural interests, should this be necessary. It would refer in this connection to the Treaty on the Dutch Language Union concluded between the Kingdom of Belgium and the Kingdom of the Netherlands, which seeks to bring about integration in the field of Dutch language and literature in the widest sense and also makes provision for measures in the field of the publishing and dissemination of books'. In addition, the Commission itself suggests a specific solution for the language areas in its Communication to the Council concerning the European dimension with regard to books of 27 November 1985 (COM(85) 681 final).

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As General Secretary of the Dutch Language Union, I have laid great store on ensuring that this White Paper, directed as it is at the three great homogeneous language areas of the European community, can contribute in progress towards a solution in which not only the economic but also, and more particularly, the cultural aspect of the question can come into its own. Perhaps I may be permitted to express the wish that it will play a role in your deliberations here today.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The question of fixed prices for books is not in itself the subject you are here this week to discuss. It is, however, one small part of that much greater subject of Books and Literacy.

In view of all I have said, it will not surprise you that the Dutch Language Union has wished to contribute in a more general way to the organisation and success of this conference. The lead in this has rested with the Dutch Ministry of Welfare, Health and Cultural Affairs.

The subject of 'Books and Literacy' is a very serious one for our society. It deserves political attention, and there is also a need for experts and interested parties from all our countries to reflect and ponder on the matter.

I wish you all success in your discussions.

Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Despite numerous engagements which unfortunately prevented me from participating in the main programme, I was determined to be here at the moment when you were formulating your conclusions, because I believe that the subject of this international Conference is of crucial importance for the future of culture in Europe.

As Monsieur André said during the opening session, the Commission is concerned about the prospects for European culture, faced as it is by new challenges. That is why it is about to lay before the European Council and the European Parliament a plan for revitalising culture in the Community based on urgent action in five broad areas: the creation of a cultural dimension; promotion of the European book industry; access to cultural sources; the cultural aspects of education; and the cultural dialogue with the rest of the world. The plan covers the period 1988 to 1992. Books form an integral part of the Commission's proposals.

I shall not dwell on the necessity for a cultural revival; we are all aware that it is essential not only in cultural terms, but also politically, socially and economically. I should like to emphasise that the Commission fully shares the view expressed during the opening session by the Minister for Welfare, Health and Cultural Affairs, Mr Brinkman, that international cooperation leading to concerted action is the only solution to the present crisis.

Reading the conclusions of the four working groups, I was most gratified to see that you have responded positively to Mr Brinkman's appeal for concrete proposals. May I offer you my congratulations, since such pragmatism is indispensable for a constructive dialogue between those working in the field of culture and the public authorities, whether the latter are national, European or international.

Your recommendations will be carefully analysed by the Commission and will serve as a source of inspiration for our work on the revival of culture in the Community in the months to come.

I should, however, like to make a number of observations regarding the basic preoccupations which emerge from your conclusions. Four central themes can be discerned: firstly, the need for thorough research into the various forms of the media in order to establish reliable and comparable data; secondly, the need to improve coordination, mainly within the EC, regarding the price of books and the rate of VAT levied on them; thirdly, the increasing degree of concentration within the book industry, and finally, policy on grants for literary translation.

Taking the first theme, that of knowledge of European culture, it is obvious that the problems relating to cultural statistics – their unreliability and the fact that they cannot easily be compared – must be solved as soon as possible. Only then can those working in the field of culture and the political authorities in the EC base



their decisions on accurate information regarding culture in the EC presented against a general socio-economic background. The same applies to sociological research into the cultural activities and traditions of the peoples of Europe.

Turning to what were rightly your major preoccupations, the price of books and the rate of VAT, I am very aware of both their cultural and commercial significance. I have advocated within the institutions of the Community that the two issues be linked and I have taken careful note of your demands in this respect. Without wishing to become embroiled in what is a very complex problem at this point, I should like to endorse your call for improved coordination in Europe. The battle is not yet over ...

On the subject of the increasing concentration of the book industry, I share the opinion of Group III, which invites the public authorities to keep a close eye on mergers within the publishing industry so that the variety of books on sale can be preserved. There are legal instruments at EC level which can be used to this end and a possible solution would be to arrive at a definition of the concept of a 'relevant market' at the level of the internal market, embracing the changes taking place in all media forms as a result of new technology.

With regard to the promotion of literary translation, which raises the question of the terms of employment and standard of living of literary translators, the Commission will be proposing a series of measures designed to improve the procedure whereby works are selected for translation by establishing a set of criteria to be followed, by promoting the publication of such works in popular editions and by establishing annual prizes for the best translations of literary works in a minority language, to be awarded by a European jury.

I do not wish, Mr Chairman, to abuse the time you have kindly accorded me in this closing session, but having outlined the Commission's readiness to help the industry deal with the practical problems arising from new cultural challenges, I should like to take this opportunity of thanking and indeed congratulating the organisers of this Conference. They have made an outstanding contribution to the efforts being made within the Community to establish ways of thinking and acting which are indispensable for the development of a European cultural identity.

Thank you.

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U m b e r t o  
E c o



According to Plato (in Phaedrus) Theut, or Hermes, the alleged inventor of writing, presents his invention to the Pharaoh Thamus, praising this new technique that will allow human beings to remember what they would otherwise forget. But the Pharaoh is not satisfied. My skillful Theut, he says, memory is such a great gift that ought to be kept alive by training it continuously. With your invention people will not be obliged any longer to train memory. They will remember things not because of an internal effort, but by mere virtue of an external device.

We can understand the preoccupation of the Pharaoh.

Writing, as any other new technological device, would have made torpid the human power which it substituted and reinforced – as well as cars made us less able to walk.

Writing was dangerous because it decreased the powers of mind, by offering human beings a petrified soul, a caricature of mind, a mineral memory.

Plato's text is ironical, naturally. Plato was writing his argument against writing. But he was pretending that his discourse was told by Socrates, who did not write. Therefore Plato was expressing a fear that still survived at his days. Thinking is an internal affair; the real thinker would not allow books to think instead of him.

Nowadays, nobody shares these preoccupations, for two very simple reasons. First of all, we know that books are not ways of making somebody else think at our place; on the contrary they are machines that provoke further thoughts. Secondly, if once upon a time people needed to train their memory in order to remember things, after the invention of writing they had also to train their memory in order to remember books. Books challenge and improve memory do not narcotize it.

One is entitled to speculate about that old debate every time one meets a new communicational tool which pretends or seems to substitute books.

In the course of the last year some preoccupied and preoccupying reports have been published in the United States on the decline of literacy. One of the reasons of the recent Wall Street crack has been, according to many observers, not only the exaggerated confidence in computers but also the fact that none among the yuppies who were controlling the stock market knew enough about the 1929 crises. They were unable to face a crisis because of their lack of historical information. If they had read some books about the Black Thursday they could have been able to make a better decision and to avoid many well known pitfalls.

I agree, but I wonder if books would have been the only reliable vehicle for acquiring information. Time ago the only way to learn foreign languages (outside travelling abroad) was to study a language on a book. Now our kids frequently know other languages by listening records, by watching movies in original edition, by deciphering the instructions printed upon a can of beverage. The same happens with geographical information.

In my childhood I got the best of my information about exotic countries not from textbooks but by adventure novels (Jules Verne, for instance, or Emilio Salgari, or

Karl May). My kids, very early knew more than me on the same subject by watching t.v. and movies.

The illiteracy of Wall Street yuppies was not only due to an insufficient exposure to books but also to a form of visual illiteracy. Books about the 1929 Black Thursday exist and are still regularly published (the yuppies must be blamed for not being bookstore and library goers) while television and cinema are practically unconcerned with any rigorous revisitation of historical events. One could learn very well the story of Roman Empire through movies, provided that movies were historically correct. The fault of Hollywood is not to have opposed its movies to the books of Tacitus or of Gibbon, but rather to have imposed a pulp and romance-like version of both Tacitus and Gibbon. The problem with the yuppies is not only that they watch t.v. instead of reading books: it is that New York channel 13 is the only one where somebody knows who Gibbon was.

I am not stressing these points in order to say there is the possibility of a new literacy that makes books obsolete. My God, every penny I ever made in my life - as a publisher, as a scholar and as an author - came from books. My points are rather the followings:

- 1 Today the concept of literacy comprises many media. An enlightened policy of literacy must take into account the possibilities of all these media. Educational preoccupations must be extended to the whole of media. Responsibilities and tasks must be carefully balanced. If for learning languages, tapes are better than books, take care of cassettes. If a commented presentation of Chopin on compact disks helps people to understand Chopin, don't worry if people do not buy a five volumes history of romantic music.
- 2 Do not fight against false enemies. Even if it were true that today visual communication overwhelms written communication, the problem is not to oppose written to visual communication. The problem is how to improve both. In the Middle Ages visual communication was, for the masses, more important than writing. But Chartres Cathedral was not culturally inferior to the *Imago Mundi* of Honorius of Autun. Cathedrals were the t.v. of these times, and the difference with our t.v. was that the directors of the medieval t.v. read good books, had a lot of imagination and worked for the public profit.

We are frequently misled by a 'mass media criticism of mass media' which is superficial and regularly belated. Mass media are still repeating that our historical period is and will be more and more dominated by images. Mass media people have read McLuhan too late. The actual and the forthcoming young generation is and will be a computer oriented generation. The main feature of a computer screen is that it hosts and displays more alphabetic letters than images. The new generations will be alphabetic and not image oriented.

Moreover, the new generation is trained to read at an incredible speed. An old fashioned university professor is today incapable to read a computer screen at the same speed than a teenager. These same teenagers, if by chance they want to program their own home computer, must know, or learn, logical procedures and algorithms, and must type on a keyboard, at a great speed, words and numbers.

I said that we have not to fight against false enemies. In the same vein let me say that we have not to endorse false friends. To read a computer screen is not the same as to read a book. I do not know if you are familiar with the process of learning a new computer program. Usually the program is able to display on the screen all the instructions you need. But usually the users who wants to learn the program and to save their sight either print the instructions and read them as if they were in a book form, or buy a printed manual. It is possible to conceive of a visual program that explains very well how to print and bind a book, but in order to get instructions as how to write a computer program we need a book.

After having spent few hours at a computer's console I feel the need of sitting comfortably down in an armchair and to read a newspaper, and maybe a good poem.

I think that computers are diffusing a new form of literacy but are incapable to satisfy all the intellectual needs they are stimulating. I am an optimist 12 hours per day, and pessimist for the rest. In my hours of optimism I dream of a computer generation which, compelled to read compulsively a computer screen, gets acquainted with reading, but at a certain moment feels unsatisfied and looks for a different, more relaxed and diversely committing form of reading. In Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris*, Frolo, comparing a book with his old cathedral, says: 'Ceci tu era cela'. I think that, speaking today of computers and books, one could say: 'Ceci aidera cela'.

Do not fight against false enemies. One of the most common objections against the pseudo-literacy of computers is that young people gets more and more accustomed to speak through cryptic short formulas: dir, help, diskcopy, error 67, and so on. Is that still literacy?

I am an old books collector and I feel delighted when I read the 17th century titles, that took one page and sometimes more. The introductions were several pages long, started with elaborate courtesy formulas praising the ideal Addressee, usually an Emperor or a Pope, and lasted for pages and pages explaining in a very baroque style the purposes and the virtues of the text to follow.

If baroque writers read our contemporary scholarly books they will be horrified. Introductions are one page long, briefly outline the subject matter of the book, thank some National or International Endowment for a generous grant, shortly explain that the book has been made possible by the love and understanding of a wife or husband and of some children, credits a secretary for having patiently typed the manuscript. We understand perfectly the whole of human and academical ordeals suggested by those few lines, the hundred of nights spent understressing photocopies, the innumerable frozen hamburgers eaten in a hurry (no caviar behind it)... I guess that in the near future three lines saying:

two, Smith, Rockefeller

(to be read as: I thank my wife and my children, the book is due to the generous assistance of professor Smith and was made possible by the Rockefeller Foundation)

would be as eloquent as a baroque introduction. It is a problem of rhetoric and of acquaintance with a given rhetoric. I think that in the next years passionate love message will be sent under the form of a short instruction.

There is a curious idea according to which in verbal language the more you say the more you are profound and perceptive. Mallarmé told us that it is sufficient to spell out 'une fleur' to evoke a universe of perfumes, shapes, and thoughts. Frequently for poetry, the less the words, the more the things. Three lines of Pascal say more than three hundred pages of a long and boring treatise on morals and metaphysics. The quest for a new and surviving literacy ought not to be the quest for a pre-informatic quantity.

The enemies of literacy are hiding elsewhere.

Let us now reconsider the debate between Theut and Thamus. Thamus assumed that the invention of writing would have diminished the power of human memory. I objected that human memory has been improved by the continuous exercise of remembering what books say. But to remember written words is not the same as to remember things. Probably the memory of the librarians of Alexandria was quantitatively larger than the one of the illiterate savage but the illiterate savage has a more specialized memory for things, shapes, odors, colors. To react to the invention of writing, Greek and Latin civilization invented the artes memoriae so that orators and teachers could survive as thinkers in the frequent cases of scarcity of books.

The memory of Cicero or of Aquinas was more flexible and powerful than our

one. If not Theut's invention, certainly Gutenberg's one has weakened the mnemonic capabilities of our species. To counteract the negative effects of printing, the old school insisted on training young people in learning poems, dates and lists of historical figures by heart.

Our permissive society, relying on the abundance of tapes and of other forms of recording, has further rendered memory, as a mental ability, rather obsolete. The use of computer will work in the same direction. Perhaps you remember a short story by Isaac Asimov where, in a future world dominated by intelligent machines, the last human being who still remembers the multiplication table by heart is covered by the Pentagon and various secret services, because he represents the only calculator able to function in cases of power shortage. In a way our present society tends to encourage well trained human memories through t.v. programs devoted to quizzes, and through the so called trivia games.

Menaced by the increasing of an image oriented culture, our technological society has already spontaneously reacted in terms of free market dynamics. After all, after the invention of t.v. the quantity of printed material in the world has not decreased. On the contrary it has grown up to an extent that was unknown to the previous centuries, even though we compare this increase with the corresponding increase of world population.

In simple terms, it seems that previously illiterate people, once exposed to television, at a certain moment start to read newspapers. I understand that such a merely quantitative evaluation does not say too much in terms of highbrow culture, since there are newspapers that are worse than t.v. programs. But when speaking of literacy it is better to forget the shibboleths of highbrow culture. Speaking of literacy in our contemporary world we are not only concerned with the happy few of Bloomsbury, but with the masses of the third world.

The real question is rather how to face a series of phenomena which are menacing the universe of books, and the cultural heritage that books represent. I shall list some problems, I shall not pretend to suggest solutions. It is pretty late and I have started my 12 hours of pessimism.

- 1 Books are menaced by books. Any excess of information produces silence. When I am in USA I read the New York Times everyday except on sunday. The Sunday Times contains too much information and I do not have time enough to consume it. Bookstores are so crowded with books that are obliged to keep only the most recent ones. In certain countries public libraries are collapsing under the weight of their cartaceous hosts. No central committee, no enlightened censorship can decide which books to discourage, and which ones to support.
- 2 Books are still an expensive merchandise, at least in comparison with other forms of communication like t.v. It has been recently established an international committee against the taxation of books in the Common Market, and since I am the president of this committee I cannot but agree with its requests. But there are unfortunate side-effects of good ideas. To decrease the price of books will encourage the publication and the circulation of them but it will at the same time increase their number — with all the dangers I considered at the above item 1.
- 3 New technologies are competing each other. Books are now more available than in any other period of human history but publisher know to what an extent the photocopy technology is jeopardizing their interests.

A photocopy of a paperback is still more expensive than the original but the paperback market follows the success of the hard cover edition and for many important scientific books only the hard cover edition is conceivable.

I am a writer, I live on my royalties, and once my american publisher told me that he wanted to sue a professor who told his 30 students to make photocopies of one

of my books, too expensive for them. I asked my publisher to refrain from any legal action, because I would have done the same.

The main international scientific publishers have found a way to escape this predicament. They publish a very reduced number of copies, they price the book three hundred dollars and they take for granted that they will be bought only from the main libraries, and the rest will be piracy. So prices increase, and the physical act of reading scientific material becomes more and more unpleasant, since everybody knows the difference between reading a crisp original page and to read a xerox. Moreover the very act of photocopying a book usually makes me to feel scholarly virtuous and up-to-date, I have the text, and afterwards I do not feel any longer the need of reading it. Today scientific people are accumulating enormous stocks of xeroxed material that they will never read. Ironically, the technology of photocopy makes easier to have books, not easier to read them. Thus billions of trees are killed for unread photocopies.

- 4 Trees, alas. Every new book reduces the quantity of oxygen in our atmosphere. We should start thinking of ecological books. But when, in the last century, the book industry stopped to make books from rags and started to make them from trees, it did not only menace our survival, it jeopardized the book civilization. A modern book cannot survive more than seventy years. I have books of the fifties that I cannot open any longer. In the next fifty years the modern section of my personal library will be a mere handful of dust. We know that acid free paper is expensive, that chemical procedures for preserving already existing books can be reasonably applied only to a reduced number of them. To film all the books contained in a huge library will certainly save their content, but will limit their consultation to a small number of professional students. A way to escape this danger is to republished books every few years. But this decision is regulated by the market and by the public demand. According to this criterion in the next one thousand years **Gone with the wind** will survive, and **Ulysses** will not.

The only solution will be to appoint special committees which will decide which books to save (by chemical rescue, by reprint or by microfilm). The power of such committees will be enormous. Not even Torquemada, or the Big Brother of 1984 had such a selective authority.

I am an author. I want not to be saved by a special committee, I want not to be saved by the mass demand, I want not to be saved in form of a cryptic microfilm. I want to survive for centuries and centuries, unknown to everybody, in the secret of an old forgotten library, as it happened to the classical authors during the Middle Ages. I cannot. I know for sure that I cannot. Should I sell myself to Gorbacev, to Reagan, to the Pope, to Komeyni, in order to have as a reward an acid free edition?

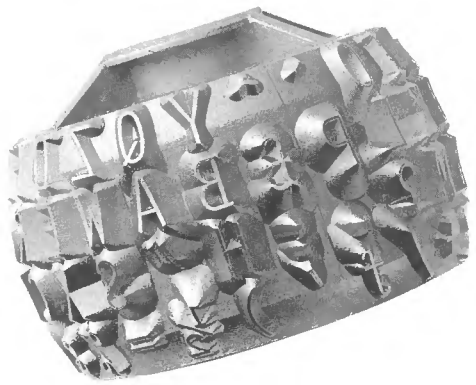
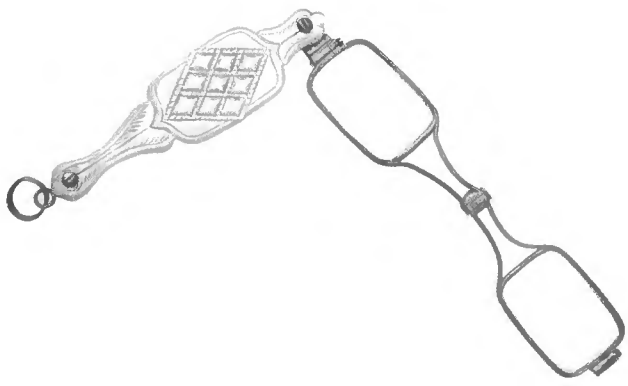
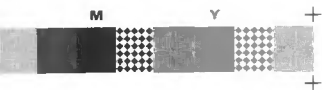
- 5 Finally. Who will decided which books to give to the third world? I have attended recently at the Frankfurt Bookfair a meeting, organized by German publishers, about the necessity of sending books to the young people in Nicaragua. I was sympathetic with the initiative, and I trust the committee that invited me. But the problem is bigger than that. The whole of the third world is coming out from illiteracy in the sense that probably kids will learn to read and write. But they will have not the economic possibility of having books. Who will choose the books for them? The American Fundamentalist Churches which are making a consistent economic effort in order to spread through Latin America? Soviet Union? The Roman Church?

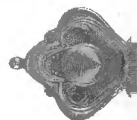
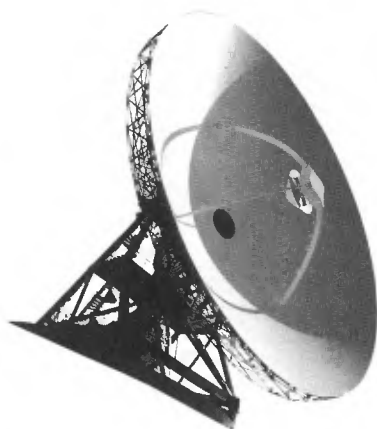
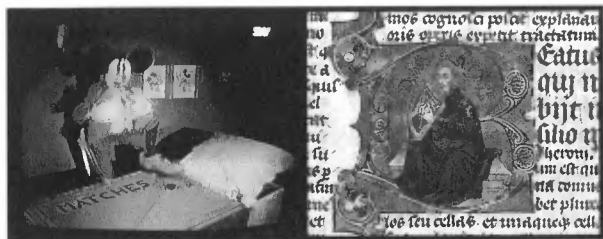
I suppose that three quarters of world population cannot today afford books. They can only receive some of them graciously. Who will decide for them? There is in the next future the possibility of making millions and millions of people to think in one or in another way, depending on the organizational and economic effort of those who will decide to send them books. I feel preoccupied by the power that somebody — I do not know who, certainly not my university — will have in the few following decades.



I understand that my pessimistic period has been maybe shorter but more intense than that the optimistic one. I think that some of the problems I have outlined should be discussed in the course of these days.

**U m b e r t o E c o**





4 a s d f



International Conference 'Books and Literacy:  
a response to new developments'.  
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B o o k s  
a n d  
t r a n s l a t i o n s

Working group I

**Author: Kees Holierhoek**

Curriculum Vitae

Kees Holierhoek was born in 1941, read Dutch Language and Literature at the University of Leiden, now works as a writer, has been Secretary of the Society of Authors/Writers' Union and is at present Chairman of the Authors' Rights Committee for Writers and Translators of the LIRA Foundation.



## **I Introduction**

Anyone who is convinced of the importance of international communications, in particular of literary communications through translated works of a general cultural value, will be perturbed on discovering the problems which confront all those who take part in this communications process but, in particular, the subject of this dissertation, the translators.

The solution of these problems — involving a national contribution by each of the countries and coordinated within Europe — first demands a comprehensive survey. This would pay most attention to the most vital and at the same time, in many ways, the weakest link in the whole: the translator working in the literary, i.e. cultural, field. This is being done in pursuance of a directive from the European Commission given to the Council, as follows: 'Special attention — mainly by way of authors' rights — should be given to improving the social and financial position of the literary translator, both aspects of which are far from satisfactory. Literary translators in general receive very little remuneration, which is neither in accordance with the talent and effort required for their work nor with the importance of their work in the cultural exchanges which take place between the various language groups of the Community.'<sup>1)</sup>

It will also be seen that the literary translator's problems are in a class of their own and are also closely linked to the general position of the translated work of literature. Both the translator and the translated work must therefore form the subject of this argument.

## **2 The problem**

This process of communication — without detracting from its idealistic values — may be expressed in economic terms by supply and demand or, more exactly, production, distribution and consumption.

On the production side are the author of the original work, the translator, the publisher and the printer. The channels of distribution mainly involve the bookshops, libraries and book clubs. And finally, all efforts are directed towards consumption by the reader.

The question to which, on closer inspection, this cultural-economic circuit will be subjected is: how can we increase the number and improve the quality of translations of books of general cultural merit in such a way as to intensify international literary communications and at the same time transform the profession of the literary translator from what is too often a shadowy, underpaid occupation to a recognised professional activity performed under socially acceptable conditions?

Inevitably the perspective of the author of this survey will be influenced, if not determined, in many respects by the situation in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, the author hopes that much of what is put forward here also applies to other European countries.

## **3 Increasing the number of translations**

The employment situation of the literary translator will be improved by a larger number of translations. His social position will improve if the translations he makes are sold in larger numbers, provided of course that under his contract a larger volume of sales will be to his advantage.

It is from this point of view that we shall examine the possibility of increasing the number of translations.

## 3.1

To begin in the economic area, the generalisation may be made that one way to increase the number of literary translations on the market is to reduce the consumer price of the book translated. To put this negatively: increasing the price will not improve the market position. The question may be asked whether reducing the price is a reasonable proposition and, if not, whether there are at least ways by which to stabilise the price.

This question becomes all the more urgent because the translated work suffers from the burden of an extra cost price factor in comparison with the untranslated work, i.e. the translator's fee.

Let us first consider the production side and examine the possibilities presented here for increasing the number of translations.

Still strictly theoretically speaking, from the publisher's point of view there are the following ways to reduce costs: by spending less on the writer of the original work, the translator, the printer or his own overheads. Apart from this, on the benefit side, there are – again theoretically speaking – certain subsidies which might reduce production costs. Finally, production costs could, on balance, be positively influenced if the publisher were to receive a larger proportion of the price paid by the consumer/reader, as against the proportion earned by the distribution network including the wholesaler and the bookshop, although a change in the profit margin of this kind need not necessarily lead to a lower consumer price.

In view of the social position of writers and translators, it would not seem desirable to make cost reductions at their expense unless one is of the opinion that some evidence of greater solidarity with their translators can be expected of writers who are much translated (and much sold).

With regard to the technical side of publishing a translated book, there are now automated processes which reduce the production costs, particularly the cost of typesetting. The question might be asked as to how far it is possible or desirable to apply at least part of these savings to improving the remuneration of the translator who can provide his text in a form suitable for automated processing. It is however a fact that the printers are not prepared without some protest to pass on the benefit gained from this kind of automation to the publisher who, in turn, would pass (some of) it on to the translator. Reducing their own overheads will not be possible or even desirable for many publishers.

Against altering the profit margin at the expense of the distribution network and in favour of the publisher, in the final retail price, the argument is often advanced that such a procedure would deal a serious, perhaps even fatal, blow to the profitability of the distributors, such as bookshops. Yet I venture to ask the question here whether in every case the producers ever jointly pit all their strength against the power of the often highly concentrated distribution organisations. Besides, a shift in the profit margin of this kind will not necessarily lead to an improved market position for the translated book. It is, however, possible that in this way there will be more money to be shared by the producers of the book, which ought to improve the translator's position as well.

Finally, grant aid, which can be justified in the interests of culture offers a way of influencing production costs favourably. In all too few European countries and on too small a scale are grants offered to writers, translators and publishers operating in the literary/cultural sector. And where grants are made this is not always done in accordance with the publicly avowed high value the government claims it places on this sector.

Now that the social position of writers and translators leaves so much to be desired, it would be uneconomical to subsidise the publisher at the expense of subsidising writers and translators. Grants to publishers to reduce their production costs of literary translations should then be regarded as a particular form of support, in

every sense justifiable, of the whole literary communications process.

The instruments of grant aid should therefore jointly be directed or remain directed towards the three separate producers of the book: writers, translators and publishers of books of particular cultural value.

### 3.2

Between the producers of the translated work and the purchasers/readers are the organisations engaged in their distribution. They add their own share to the consumer price of the book. They include wholesalers, booksellers and book clubs.

A special form of distribution is carried out by the, often subsidised, library system, which ought also to receive attention.

Again on a theoretical level, the question might be repeated as to whether the share that commercial, profit-making distributors, take of the ultimate retail price might not be reduced, whether or not in the publisher's, and consequently the translator's, favour.

In addition, with regard to the distribution network, so essential for the proper functioning of the communications process under examination, there is an impression that a book of special cultural value is not always promoted with the same eagerness and energy in its distribution as is the case with a guaranteed best-seller. However understandable this may be from a financial point of view, it should be part of the business policy of the distributors to disseminate cultural and literary works as widely as possible.

To boycott certain unacceptable works must be regarded as a breach of this desirable business policy and in the last resort as a doubtless legally defensible but in practice serious restriction of the freedom of the press and/or of expression.

It would seem quite justifiable for every bookseller to be free to make a personal selection of the books he will stock but that it may be the bookshop's moral obligation to supply any book which is requested.

The introduction of a general catalogue and the supply of books from one central point has not always proved a good thing for the variety of the books on offer in the bookshop. It often happens that the bookshop merely orders a very small number of copies (sometimes no more than one) which means that the risk is transferred very definitely to the producers of the book. It may be advisable to consider this in connection with grant aid, in the form of an interest-free loan to the bookseller to compensate for loss of interest on capital invested in stock if he is prepared to promote the sales of a work of cultural merit by stocking a large number of copies.

In many countries the number of libraries and number of books lent by libraries have increased considerably over the past few decades. The purchasing policy of these libraries, which is a fairly important factor for many publishers in their calculations, is playing an ever more decisive role in the success or failure of a publication. It may also be said that libraries whose grants are reduced more often dispense with the work of cultural value than the romantic novel.

And whatever one's opinion may be of the effect of lending as a promotional activity which will help to increase reading or as a form of distribution which competes with the ordinary sales outlets, it is a fact that writers, translators and publishers view this growth with increasing anxiety and, as long as no general form of lending compensation in favour of the book producers exists, this distribution channel will continue to enjoy the critical attention of the book producers.

### 3.3

Looking at the consumer side of the translated book, one of the ways of reducing the price is the idea of assigning a Nil VAT rating to the whole cultural sector and



thus also the book of cultural or literary merit, provided the financial benefit gained, or at least part of it, is passed on to the reader who buys a book.

The side-effect of such a drastic measure, but one which should receive serious consideration, could mean a substantial improvement in the incomes of both writers and translators. For if an existing VAT exemption or VAT liability is altered to a Nil rating for VAT this has a beneficial effect on incomes.

The retail price of the book could thus be reduced or there would be more financial latitude for a better reward for the translator or, through a combination of both, a chance that more books would be sold and that the social position of the translator would improve.

With regard to the question of VAT I should like to quote from a directive from the European Commission to the Council: 'VAT is not neutral with respect to culture. By making cultural goods more expensive it restricts the dissemination from which they could profit.'<sup>2)</sup> And: 'If cultural goods are subject to VAT, the effects of this should be kept within reasonable limits.'<sup>3)</sup> Even though those drawing up the above texts may have been thinking primarily of cultural goods in the form of visual art, there is no reason whatever why this general warning should not be extended to books of cultural value.

Another type of reader subsidy has already been in existence for some time through the public library system. In other areas of culture too, it is a permanent part of policy to subsidise the cultural consumer. Examples of this are the grants to theatre companies and theatres, to orchestras and concert halls and to opera companies and their theatres. An equal number of arguments might be made for not dismissing in advance any policy which would actively subsidise the buyer/reader of a book of cultural merit.

In a more general sense, too, the government can play an important role in encouraging the sale of books of cultural merit by giving its support in a number of ways to the promotion of this cultural article. Activities of this kind should really begin in the schools, be continued through the work of libraries and anywhere else where literary books are consumer items.

Here, one might suggest government support of such institutions as help to increase awareness of literary publications, institutions which are set up, for example, by the publishers of literary works.

One might also consider the holding of events in connection with the publication of such books, at which poets, writers and translators would appear with a view to drawing public attention to their work.

In this context, one must obviously make a special point of the necessity of promoting abroad the sale of books translated from the language of one's own country, by making funds available for promotional activities.

It is not sufficient to make funds available for launching a translation on the market. A government contribution for what must happen then in order for it to reach its sales target would be both legitimate and most desirable.

#### **4 Improving the quality of translations**

We may take it that the quality of translations will be improved by, among other things, increasing the professionalism of the translator. Usually a professional performance depends on training, fee and, as a result, on the time available for the work. Let us first consider the training aspect.

It should never be the intention of the group of professional literary translators to operate a closed shop to which only a few are admitted with the right kind of

diploma. Nevertheless the image of the translator's profession and his proficiency may be improved if Translation is offered as a degree subject at university level in his country.

At secondary school level, the reduction in the number of foreign languages being learned by students is a cause for serious concern. Not only will many languages remain a closed book to many future European adults but the all-important familiarisation with celebrated authors in the history of the literature of other countries will be reduced to a minimum. No interest in the work of these writers in translation will be kindled.

Apart from this, the recruitment of professional translators will run into difficulties if any further reductions take place. In the Netherlands — to give just one example — the number of translators from French is already noticeably on the decline.

For the continuous learning process which the translator experiences through life, not only is the availability of adequate and indispensable aids to the profession, like dictionaries, of paramount importance but the opportunity to participate in seminars and cultural exchanges and, for example, visits to translation centres such as Straelen and Arles, are facilities which must be considered desirable. Visiting lectureships of translators to foreign universities and other research/educational institutions should also be encouraged. Students who concentrate on a special language with the intention of translating from that language must be afforded an opportunity to visit the country whose language they are studying. And in order to refresh his knowledge of the language in which he has specialised the translator should be enabled to visit on a fairly regular basis the country where this language is spoken and where it is constantly subjected to change. In addition, it should be possible, if he wishes, to have discussions with the author of the original work, to visit the locality in which a work of literature is set and to carry out research in the country of origin to assist with the text which he is translating.

All these forms of education and training should, in the interests of international literary communications, be the subject of special attention on the part of the European and national authorities.

Grants and the application of the tax concessions generally accepted in other professions, such as deduction of expenses made in the performance of one's work, are the two instruments which would appear to be most suitable in this case. Ideally, in fixing the amount of the fee, all such educational and professional expenses should be taken into account. The assessment of the quality of a translation is done firstly by the publisher and his staff but also, in the final analysis, by the reader, often a specialist reader: the critic. It is chiefly the critic who — in addition to voicing his opinion of the original work — by focusing attention on the translation, preferably by expressly naming the translator, can heighten the reader's awareness of the latter's indispensable function. All too rarely does the critic concern himself with the translation, or translator, when making his final judgement.

A high educational level on the readers' part, especially in regard to their own and other languages, undeniably raises the general standard of quality. In this connection, too, it is in the interest of culture to give a high priority to the learning of foreign languages in school.

## **5 The position of minority language areas**

Minority language areas are at a disadvantage compared with the majority language areas and their position deserves closer and separate consideration. The chief reason for the relatively small numbers of translations from the minority language areas lies in that fact the publishers in the normal commercial circuit are more interested in works from the majority language areas. Writers from the minority language areas are usually less well-known, the commercial risk is greater

and there is greater pessimism regarding the financial results. The minority language areas, therefore, as well as having problems which are peculiar to selling in a small market, have an additional handicap in exporting their literary and cultural books.

A 'book bureau' for the minority language areas, preferably set up jointly by them, supported by financial contributions from the European Communities in compensation for their double handicap, or (if their solidarity should stretch to it) partly made possible by a contribution from the major language areas (for example from the surplus public lending right dues received, if this right is ever generally implemented), could do an important promotional job in the leading markets such as the United States; because, any book which has been discovered by an American publisher is able to command great interest among publishers in other countries and in other languages.

In order to circumvent bureaucratic obstacles, a bureau of this kind should be flexibly set up in the closest possible collaboration with the publishers concerned. Funds would have to be made available to allow authors of translated works to travel for the promotion of their translated work to the country in which it is published. A spearhead policy on the part of the minority language areas which would be aimed at the English, French and German-speaking markets, would probably achieve more than separate, limited exports.

The minority language areas will also have difficulties in the future if public lending rights in the form of royalties are introduced in Europe. The public lending royalties incurred in respect of foreign copyrightholders on the reciprocity principle would probably many times exceed the royalties due to domestic copyrightholders from abroad. Minority language areas are, after all, generally much larger importers of literary and cultural books in translation. In view of this imbalance there will be many cases where governments will have little enthusiasm for the introduction of public lending royalties based on copyright. The introduction of some form of public lending rights might perhaps be expedited by the setting up of a European compensatory fund for public lending royalties which would offer some compensation for the disadvantages which the status of a minority language area entails. A percentage levy on public lending royalties to foreign copyrightholders could form one of the financial resources for such a fund.

It is also possible that there is a role here for CISAC, the International Convention of Societies of Authors and Composers, and its various national member organisations. This organisation already levies such a percentage on royalties due to foreign copyrightholders.

Ultimately, an arrangement of this nature should mean that the minority language areas will be compensated to some extent for the double handicap for which they are not to blame.

## **6 The characteristics of the translator's position**

This brief examination of the translator's position is concerned with two aspects: authors' rights and the social/economic side.

In considering copyright, attention is also given to regularising their legal position in actual publishing contracts. The social/economic aspect is concerned, on the one hand, with their tax position and, on the other, with their position in respect to social security.

### **6.1 Authors' rights**

The translator enjoys his own author's right of protection as far as his translation is concerned. In theory, his legal position is just as strong as that of the writer of the original work but, in practice, contracts all too often reflect very little of this.

Where there is a reference to translation rights in the two international conventions on copyright (the Berne Convention and the Universal Copyright Convention), this refers to the translation rights of the writer of the original work. Translators are then decidedly subject to the legislation of the country in which the translated work is published.

The guarantee that his work enjoys copyright protection given in the contract which is the written confirmation of his negotiations with the publisher, hardly ever provides what might be hoped for under ideal conditions: a secure basis for a reasonable existence as a professional translator.

In practice, he would be served by a uniform representation by a strong organisation, strong by reason of the numbers and quality of its membership. This might, for example, be a society for translators only or a translators' section of a society of authors.

The combining of negotiations for the commercial rights of the translated work by a copyright society is also one way to strengthen the translator's position with respect to those who commercialise his work.

He would also be served by legislation in his country which prescribed minimum conditions (basic regulations) to which any contracts he would make with publishers would have to conform and which could be enforced by law.

Organisation and where necessary legal support should enable the translator in the area of first rights to have royalties paid after a certain number of copies of the translated book are sold. In the area of secondary rights (or more correctly the rights ensuing from further exploitation) he would be entitled to a reasonable share of the proceeds of public lending rights, reprographic rights, the use of material in other books, the use of the translation in readers or in broadcasting on radio or television.

The complete transfer of copyright for a translation for a once-off payment is all too often the sign of short-sightedness on the part of a translator who, when in financial difficulties, prefers to receive one payment of a thousand guilders than an annual payment of seven hundred and fifty over a four-year period.

By using standard contracts agreed by translators' organisations and, where necessary, legislation, the translator can protect himself from short-sighted decisions born of necessity.

## 6.2 The social and economic position

### 6.2.1 The tax position

Anyone who considers the translator's position from the tax point of view will find himself in a complex area. Not only will he come up against varying kinds of tax regulations which apply to the translator but also variations in tax regulations from country to country. On the basis that, in the long run, in a united Europe the various tax systems will gradually, possibly very slowly, come together, it would seem wise to come to some international arrangement regarding what the translator's tax position ought to be. Already the idea has been recommended that for the whole sector of the Arts, including books of literary and cultural merit and perhaps even books in general, a turnover tax of Nil per cent should be agreed by all member states.

Following on from this suggestion, the translator — just as other artists in the various sectors — would be categorised as a (cultural) purveyor who can charge a Nil rate of VAT. This position would not oblige him to hand over any VAT whatever and at the same time afford the profitable means of recovering VAT paid on essential materials and expenses incurred in the course of his work.

Without having any particular national taxation system in mind, as a general rule there are two categories of taxpayer: the company and the employee, or in other words the self-employed and the person who contracts in some way to work for another. If agreement is to be reached on this point with a view to a future tax position, it may be said that the translator, if he is seeking a form of equality in this area and in this respect with the writer of original work, will almost certainly find himself in the position of a self-employed person. If, on the contrary, he wishes to relate to the position of an editor of a publishing house, he will almost certainly find himself in the position of an employee. By coming to a timely agreement it may be possible to influence the translator's tax position in the future.

In this context, I would defend the suggestion that it is advisable to aim at being self-employed, ignoring for the moment the status accorded to the translator under present tax legislation. As a general rule, the self-employed enjoy a more favourable tax position and have more facilities open to them. On the other hand (it may be an established fact) it is often much more difficult for the self-employed to achieve the amount of social security which is the lot of those in employment. It will often be impossible for the self-employed to insure themselves against unemployment and other forms of social security demand high premiums for insurance in the private sector.

### 6.2.2 The position regarding social security

The poor fees earned by translators in the literary/cultural sector are just what make it so difficult for them to achieve a reasonable level of social security by payment of the premiums for private sector insurance. This situation is one obstacle in the way of their professional status and at the same time, because of this, of an improved quality of translation.

Some countries, aware of this situation, by way of compensation allow translators official access to employee social insurance.

In the Netherlands this is so forcefully prescribed that the translator is really left without any freedom of choice. Nevertheless translators go to a great many lengths to escape from this enforced employee status since the translator who takes this course will be subject to unfavourable competition from other translators; he will represent considerably more expense for the publisher.

For the moment, another way may be possible and in some countries even quite justifiable, given the current very poor remuneration paid to translators, by combining the advantages of self-employment (particularly from the tax point of view) with the advantages of being employed (particularly from the social security point of view).

Ultimately, however, for a professional occupation with professional remuneration, it is much more logical and more rational to opt for the position of a self-employed person rather than an employee, even from the social point of view; but then, of course, with a social security safety net in the form of a minimum subsistence entitlement like everyone else, supplemented by additional cover for specific social insurance needs purchased in the private insurance sector.

## 7 A European statutory occupation

Anyone who is worried about the position of the literary translator will find it altogether reasonable that translators in European countries should try to professionalise their occupation by formulating a number of minimum conditions to apply to their profession and the exercise of this profession. Such minimum requirements, which ought to be embodied in a European occupational statute, would then have to be filled out in detail by member states' national policy, using the various instruments governments may have at their disposal: grant aid and — where necessary — legislation.

At the same time a European occupational statute of this nature would give the various national translators' organisations a plan of action. This statute should incorporate the joint wishes resulting from the discussions already begun between translators from different countries. These include the following:

- a Guidelines for a standard contract between translators and publishers, specifying the following: a minimum fee, a royalty agreement, an advance payment agreement, an agreement regarding the proportion of the proceeds of further exploitation (secondary rights) and a stipulation with regard to the appearance of the translator's name.

It may be noted here that any anti-cartel legislation, which would make it impossible to introduce such a standard contract, would represent a misjudgement of the weakness of the translator's negotiating position and should be resisted on social grounds.

A standard contract of this kind could also derive support from compulsory legal stipulations which apply to publishers agreement.

- b Guidelines for the social security of the translator in the event of incapacity, medical expenses, pensions and — if possible — unemployment.

It is from the publishers and the State that the translator can expect the most in matters concerning any improvement in his social position. But such an expectation can only be realised if, on the one hand, the market for translated books improves and, on the other, the government actively supports the translator.

By means of direct assistance to literary translators in the form of stipends, commissions and by giving an increase in the publisher's fee, a national government can show itself in sympathy with international communication through literature.

## **8 A European Fund for translations**

It is high time that the European Parliament's intrusive concern with the agricultural industry was balanced and complemented by an increasing concern and care for the cultural industry.

A European Fund for translations, the first ideas for which were only recently put down on paper, would be almost the first logical consequence of this and a particularly suitable way in which to further the cultural integration of Europe. And in the same way that the EC has regional policies for areas which are lagging behind in economic development, the allocation of money from this Fund could also give priority treatment to minority language areas with their double handicap outlined above. There are, however, several marginal criticisms which may be appropriate regarding the ideas already formulated on the subject of such a Fund.

The selection of titles to be translated with assistance from the Fund should not, as suggested, be left exclusively to civil servants. At the very least, representatives of the publishers, authors, translators and possibly also of the librarians should have a strong voice in this matter. The subsidised publication of books which will not sell and remain unread would be a waste of financial resources which could be put to better use. In encouraging literary intercourse in a European context, therefore, this should not merely be an exchange of the classics from each country's literature; present-day literary information is also — and perhaps especially — the ideal aim of the Fund.

Retaining the financial interest of the publishers (by both reducing the risk element and giving a realistic chance of profits) would seem to be the obvious way to keep subsidised publications from becoming neglected and forgotten orphans.

And it need hardly be said that it would be most unwise to oblige publishers availing of the Fund to publish willy-nilly anything about which they had reservations. It is greatly to be recommended that, from the inception of the Fund, not only should a watch be kept on the production of the translation but also on its distribution and sale. From this point of view, a proportion of the money from the Fund should be reserved from the start for the stimulation of the commercial distribution and the normal promotion of sales.

If the Fund operates efficiently it will give equal attention to the production, distribution and promotion of translated books. And it goes almost without saying that grants from the Fund should be on condition that the translator's fee at least satisfies reasonable minimum requirements. The extent of the Fund's financial resources should reflect the importance attached by the European Communities to European communications, including the field of literature.

## 9 Recommendations

9.1 In accordance with the EC directive to the Council, the social and financial position of literary translators needs improvement simply because of the importance of their work to the cultural exchanges between the different language groupings of the Community.

9.2 An improvement in the social and financial position of literary translators could be achieved by:

- Generally: increasing the number of translations which are produced;
- More particularly: increasing the number of translated books which are sold, on condition that under his contract the translator will benefit from higher volumes of sales;
- An increase in the remuneration literary translators receive for their work or by a change in the existing economic pattern or by the use of an instrument of grant aid to benefit the translator;
- The introduction of a Nil rating of VAT for literary translators;
- The introduction of a royalty arrangement for literary translators as well as a guarantee of a reasonable share in the proceeds of any further exploitation of the translated work based on a standard contract and — where necessary — by legal support in the form of basic regulations governing publishing agreements;
- Transferring to literary translators a reasonable share of the benefits issuing from regulations governing public lending rights, reprographic rights etc.;
- Regarding the position of the literary translator with respect to taxation and social security: encouraging the inclusion of literary translators in regulations which govern or will govern such matters as they apply to the writers of original works.

9.3 In order to stimulate national action in this area, literary translators should be enabled, with the financial and legal assistance of the European Communities, to draw up a European statute which would incorporate minimum requirements with respect to publishing agreements and social security with — where necessary — the support of legislation.

9.4 As part of a similar campaign in the whole field of the Arts, an effort should be made, not only on behalf of the work and resulting benefits of writers and translators but also on behalf of the (translated) work of cultural value, to have the VAT rating fixed at Nil per cent in order in this way to increase the book's chances of sales in Europe and to promote the book as a cultural product.

9.5 The quality of literary translations can be raised by:

- Raising the status of the profession of literary translator in a number of ways but especially by remuneration which is in accordance with the time required to be spent on this work;
- Introducing the science of translation as an academic subject at university level;

- Monitoring the educational field and encouraging the learning of a reasonable number of foreign languages in school;
- Giving the literary translator access to the professional aids indispensable to his work;
- Enabling the literary translator to extend his professional expertise and to keep up to date;
- Encouraging critics to give consideration to translations as cultural achievements with an intrinsic value of their own.

9.6 More financial resources should be made available from the European Communities in order that a European Fund for translations could be used to stimulate the translation of not only classical works of literature but also modern works of literary merit which are produced and sold through normal commercial channels. Special sums should also be set aside to promote the distribution and sales of translated books thus produced. Further sums should be available for the effective introduction and promotion of authors from minority language areas in majority language areas, for example for the support of book bureaux which, on behalf of the minority language areas, and through direct contact with the publishers they represent, would concentrate especially on the majority language areas and their markets.

9.7 The introduction of a highly desirable royalty arrangement for translators would give them a vested interest in a fixed book price. This form of vertical price fixing which favours a varied selection of books on sale, is one to which the publishers of books of cultural value, authors and also translators, subscribe.

9.8 Instruments of grant aid should be used to help both supply and demand. The supply can be stimulated by grants to the translator and to the publisher, to supplement an otherwise unacceptable level of income and to reduce the cost price of the translated book respectively. One way in which demand may be stimulated is by grants towards a reduction in the retail price of the translated book and also to help in its promotion, which is essential.

In addition to these production and reader subsidies, other grants could be used to promote the distribution of varied selections of books.

## 10 Notes

- (1) 'Community action in the cultural sector', Bulletin of the European Communities, Supplement 6/77, Section 28, p. 15.
- (2) *Idem*, Section 17, p.17.
- (3) *Idem*, Section 18, p.18.

**Kees Holierhoek**





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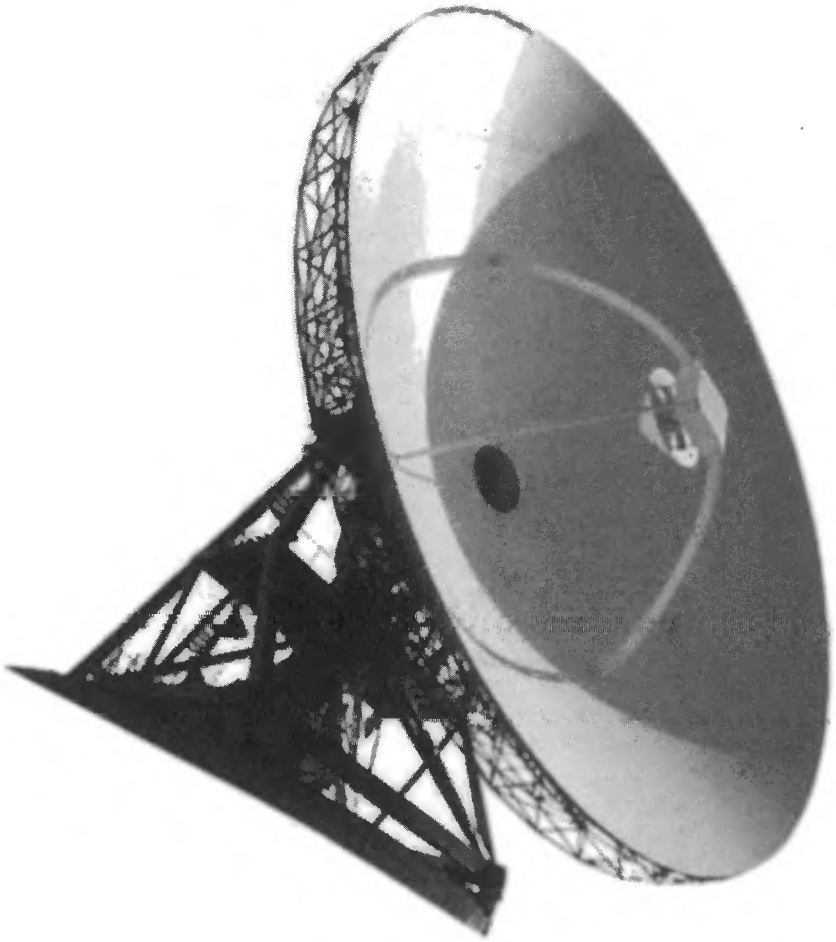
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Working group II

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Curriculum Vitae

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The aim of this paper is to provide a general framework for discussion at the Conference on 'Books and Literacy: A response to New Developments'. Its main theme is the relationship between printed and electronic mass media, and in particular the impact of the new electronic media on literate culture. In other words, it deals with the influence of the existing or rapidly developing new media (such as video, teletext, viewdata, compact disc, videodisc and digital audio tape) coupled with the dramatic increase in the number of ordinary television channels available on reading (books, magazines, newspapers, journals etc.).

For the purposes of the present discussion, the term **PRINT** refers to any kind of reading matter or writing, ranging from signposts and recipe books to Homer and Dostoevsky, irrespective of whether the language is hand-written, typed or printed and whether it is produced on paper, other materials or available on a visual display unit. The essential feature of **PRINT** is that it uses some form of **written** language. **AV** on the other hand refers to electronic audio-visual media where written text would hardly suffice to transmit information or entertainment, although reading may occasionally be involved (for example subtitles in films or television programmes). The essential feature of **AV** media is electronic transmission of visual images or spoken language or music or a combination of both.

The main reason for examining the relationship between **PRINT** and **AV** is the serious concern shared by most European governments that at certain times and under certain circumstances, the two types of media may be in direct competition with one another. The danger which **AV** media pose to reading is slightly worrying. However, the relationship between **PRINT** and **AV** is a complex cultural phenomenon which is not helped by over-simplification. For one thing, the problem is not in itself new and as its long history demonstrates, has often resulted in people taking up ideological positions or at least positions with ideological overtones.

The matter is complicated by a lack of research into the relationship between the two types of media, particularly the absence of any causal connection. The interpretation of research that **is** available poses further problems. For example, the literature regularly reports a negative correlation between children's reading habits and the amount of television they watch. While this may be interpreted as television having a negative influence on children's reading habits, an equally valid interpretation would be that children who are poor readers pick television as an alternative and convenient pastime. Second, the annual production and sales of books may be taken as an indicator of the general interest in reading within a culture. If there is no decline in book sales relative to demographic changes, this may be taken as reflecting a stable reading culture. However, such data can also be interpreted in a different light. For instance, some groups may be buying more books than they did in the past, while others are buying fewer books, thus maintaining the overall level of demand.

In spite of these ambiguities, and the general lack of research, governments and the **EC** cannot afford to put off policy-making any longer. By evaluating the present situation, it should be possible to conceive and formulate the general outline of a common approach. But to do this accurately, it is imperative to bear in mind the distinction between **central** and **peripheral** uses of the two types of media. Television can be informative and often is, but it would be inaccurate to say that the central aim of television is to inform. Television exists first and foremost to entertain. In the Netherlands, for example, where there are two national tv channels, research shows that viewers systematically switch over en masse when an information programme starts on one channel. It does not help to deny that the central function of television is to entertain by citing examples such as unexpectedly high interest in a televised Chinese course, which are peripheral to the medium. Conversely, although pure entertainment is the primary aim of a form of **PRINT**, namely pulp literature, this is not true of **PRINT** as a whole. In general, pure entertainment of the kind offered by the new **AV** media is mainly encountered in **PRINT** in specific sub-forms. In other words, each type of medium has characteristic

central functions while each medium also tolerates or even promotes functions characteristic of the other medium on its **periphery**. Such a distinction may facilitate a discussion of the relationship between AV and PRINT.

The terms entertainment and information are used here descriptively and do not imply a value judgement. Both functions partly relate to the structure of the medium; for example the relationship between PRINT and information rests on the **accessibility** of the medium. Written language embodies and objectifies meaning; you can consult it as many times as you wish and do not require a special infrastructure to do so. Hence returning to a text belongs to the standard repertoire of a literate person's behaviour. This is much less true of AV media where returning to the original is theoretically possible but less likely in practice. Purely **Audio-visual** media such as compact disc, record and DAT make it easy to listen to the same piece of music on repeated occasions. Audio-visual media however, do not promote return behaviour to the same extent, although this situation is likely to change as the price of video recorders comes down even further. Whether this will also lead to users frequently going back to things they have already watched remains to be seen. The transient nature of the medium has proved well-suited to pure entertainment, with its undeniably escapist emphasis. It therefore remains to be seen whether technical improvements enabling possible repeated access will also lead to more frequent use of AV media for information purposes. If this does happen, users will have to develop new strategies which may be prone to all kinds of bias and therefore at best less than optimal, since they are completely new to the culture. The type of problem involved can also be seen in the difficulty of storing and conserving AV products for longer periods and the problem of making them accessible. Imagine the difference between trying to obtain a copy of an old interview available in PRINT and one only available through AV. Given such difficulties, it is safe to assume that the information function of AV will remain peripheral, compared to that of PRINT for several generations to come.

A special case may be formed by information which is available through the **computers**. The introduction of computers into the home, the office and into public facilities marks a structural shift which is currently taking place and one which should not be overlooked. However, in spite of the fact that the computer is electronic, it has much in common with PRINT in most of its **professional** applications. The fact that computers provide information electronically by means of a VDU or on disc is irrelevant since more than 95% of all professional uses of computers involve written language. Of course computer applications do exist which fall outside the scope of written language; the majority of these also fall outside professional uses of the computer. In so far as computers are used solely for entertainment purposes, they have much in common with AV, particularly since visual images largely determine the entertainment potential of such applications. Hence the position of the computer in relation to AV/PRINT is ambivalent and complex. Computers can be bracketed with PRINT for professional applications and with AV as far as they are used solely for entertainment purposes. Again this distinction is valid only in terms of central uses; there may be deviations from this pattern in peripheral applications.

A further consideration is **quality**. Most, if not all European countries distinguish between 'high' and 'low' culture and use similar criteria to make the distinction. The products of high culture are 'artistic', 'original', 'classic' or 'canonical'. Whereas the products of low culture are generally described as 'trivial', 'stereotyped', 'pulp' or 'popular'. It tends also to be assumed that low culture emerges more or less spontaneously and does not need the support of other bodies in society whereas high culture relies on incentives from the authorities or some form of patronage.

It is important to emphasize that the high/low quality labels are in no way medium dependent, as previous examples have shown. Both high and low culture are distributed by PRINT and AV media. But it is also important to note that high and low products are not equally distributed between the two. Popular products are more central to AV than to PRINT and vice versa. This imbalance forms the

basis of the concern expressed in the second paragraph of this paper.

The above may be said to constitute a **qualitative** basis for concern, but there are also quantitative grounds. There can be no doubt that the new AV media are growing to such an extent that they are becoming increasingly influential in everyday life. This is confirmed, for example, in the average number of hours children in most European countries spend in front of the television set every day or by the growing numbers of children who have their own television set, record player, cassette recorder or transistor radio. The increasing likelihood that families will also own a video recorder further contributes to this process. For adults, the growing choice of TV channels and increasingly sophisticated 'toys' such as CD, videodisc, and DAT will increasingly intrude into present patterns of leisure. It may be safely assumed that these new media exert a powerful attraction to the extent of dominating other cultural forms and may therefore compete with the time an individual spends on reading. Although the quantity of information available is rising, its information value is often negligible. At the same time, watching television, which tends to be rather cursory, may influence reading patterns, discouraging people from reading less popular or more difficult works. Since reading requires a higher degree of imagination, concentration and attention — in short of mental activity — the new AV media may pose an indirect threat to it as a leisure activity. This is particularly worrying in view of the fact that our thinking is largely language-dependent. **Coherence** in information cannot be produced by images alone: it requires a symbiosis of word and image. Coherence is a characteristic, indeed it is a pre-requisite of PRINT. AV presents information with a much higher degree of fragmentation.

A final quantitative reason for concern is the decline in the consumption of books both in terms of sales and library loans. There may of course be differences here between different countries. In the Netherlands, reading has declined as a pastime since the early eighties when the new AV media really took hold. Although there is no proof of a causal relationship between these two phenomena, there is every indication that the market for AV media will continue to expand and the PRINT market will continue to decline. Indeed there is now consensus among researchers that the present pattern of development is not due to market fluctuations but should be interpreted as a structural change. The present concern of EC governments must be viewed against this background.

Apart from the quantitative and qualitative grounds for concern, there is another important consideration which should be mentioned here, the 'new illiteracy'. This may of course be our perception of constantly rising demands on literacy skills in present-day society. Nevertheless, the enormous efforts made by European countries in terms of education have made us painfully aware of the precarious nature of literacy at a time when clear demands are being made for almost complete and optimal literacy. Information in PRINT is being produced in ever-increasing quantities and with more and more diversity. Computers and databases require efficient handling of written text. Virtually all of the professions require highly developed literacy skills. Even in dealings with local, regional or national authorities the ordinary citizen needs to be literate to a considerable level of sophistication. Present-day society cannot therefore afford semi-literacy. The substitution for reading of any media which may impede the development of high standards of literacy should therefore be viewed with some concern.

Literacy, that is the use of functional skills to deal with various kinds of PRINT, is a basic prerequisite for further and higher education. The transmission of cultural, scientific and technological knowledge is almost completely dependent on sophisticated literacy skills. Although the new AV media will become increasingly important in the educational context, it is inconceivable that they will take over the basic function of PRINT in the near future. This is even less likely in another area where PRINT has a major cultural function, the field of theory and analysis, or rational argument and criticism. The discursive practices which have developed in European culture since early Modern Times, not only in education, but in law, religion, economics, science, medicine and politics too are at the very heart of

European culture and as such form a basic precondition for participation in democratic structures and organisations. Any suppression of written culture by the electronic media may therefore seriously threaten the continued existence of elements of traditional European culture which transcend their historical importance. If Europe values its literary and cultural heritage, it will have to guard against dominance by the new AV media, particularly since such media are heavily Americanised.

To conclude, PRINT and the new AV media need not necessarily compete with one another, although present trends in Europe would seem to corroborate the view that it will be increasingly difficult for them to co-exist peacefully. Differences and shifts in their relative presence and importance in society in both quantitative and qualitative terms are clearly discernible. In view of the increasing demand for literacy skills the intrusion of non-literate elements into leisure in the form of AV media should be viewed with concern. The features of the present situation provide ample reason for developing coherent policies to provide an adequate and flexible response to the challenges currently facing European traditions.

The above remarks are intended to serve as a general framework within which the discussion on 'Books and Modern Mass Media' can take place. Below are a number of more specific propositions which could be discussed in more detail, especially since one of the objectives of the conference is to produce policy-making recommendations. The propositions are not to be regarded as 'truths' in themselves but rather as discussion aids.

- 1 More research should be carried out into the relationship between reading and the uses of AV media, especially in relation to cognitive skills, social attitudes, emotional development and literary taste and in relation to the formation of cultural habits.
- 2 Investing in cultural goods and services such as reading brings about economic benefits apart from added cultural value.
- 3 Governments should develop strategies to demonstrate the added value of intensive leisure activities such as reading, to various social groups.
- 4 The current dominance of visual mass media should in part be combated with the help of visual mass media.
- 5 To restore the balance between PRINT and AV media the latter could be obliged to spend part of their broadcasting time on promoting books, literature and information concerning reading. The virtual absence of such programmes, especially from the audio-visual media is extremely worrying.
- 6 The tendency of different social groups to drift apart in their use of various types of media (e.g. heavy users/non-users, well-informed users/non-informed users, highly literate users/semi or non literate users etc.) is potentially dangerous and may undermine the functioning of democratic institutions.
- 7 Educational measures might have a beneficial effect on the uses of all types of media. Measures to be adopted could include the following:
  - a Research shows that pre-literacy activities in the family have a positive effect on children's subsequent acquisition of literacy skills. Governments should therefore devise ways of informing parents of how they can contribute to this process. They can also provide incentives for parents or parents' associations to become involved in pre-literacy family activities, without interfering with the role of parents.
  - b For many children, the gulf between school and family life has a disastrous effect on the development of an interest in reading.

- c The teaching of reading in schools concentrates far too much on technical aspects, severely neglecting the development of a genuine interest in reading and of a proper reading motivation. The same goes for writing skills. In some cases, oral skills are over-emphasized at the expense of reading and writing.
- d Most governments do not exercise any kind of control over the quality of materials used to teach reading and writing. The selection and use of materials is often purely dependent on commercial and ideological factors. By not exercising adequate control, governments are failing in one of their essential duties.
- e Generally speaking, far too little attention is devoted to active study and treatment of the media in education. This applies to all the different types of PRINT: newspapers, magazines, catalogues, directories, libraries etc. and to the use of AV media. Young people will develop critical attitudes and higher qualitative expectations vis-à-vis the modern media only if the subjects are dealt with properly in schools.
- 8 The above can only be accomplished if teacher-training courses devote time to the media. This requires practical training and a sound theoretical basis to deal with the different media. As far as PRINT is concerned, extra efforts will have to be made to establish a better cultural and theoretical background for new teachers.
- 9 Governments and the EC can and should make efforts to reduce the cultural gap between PRINT and AV media. Efforts in that direction might include:
- a Regulations governing the volume/level of imports of American or Americanised AV products. More importantly, incentives can be provided (e.g. through zero VAT on cultural or information products) to stimulate the creation and export of European products not based on American models.
- b Governments should also be concerned about raising the cultural quality and value of modern AV products. A hedonistic promotion via social institutions should be considered.
- c There is a strong need for criticism of AV media comparable to that in other areas such as music, literature, drama, dance and the visual arts. Media criticism of this kind should be actively promoted.
- d Prizes should be awarded for AV programmes (e.g. TV programmes) which are of an excellent standard and of a high cultural value. Such prizes should have the same kind of prestige as literary prizes.
- e More attention should be devoted to the study and development of AV products which are both popular and worthwhile such as Sesame Street for example.
- 10 Specialists should engage in producing coherent research proposals from an international perspective. Duplication should be avoided in order to make optimal use of resources. This requires cooperation between the EC countries. As a first step, the research results of each of the member countries should be distributed.





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B o o k s  
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Working group III

Books and the book market

64

**Authors: Marieke Bemelman - Marinus van Raalte**

Curriculum Vitae

Marinus van Raalte is the director of the Uniepers publishing house.

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Uniepers publishes books, audiovisual material, magazines and periodicals, in many cases under another imprint.



## 'The Marketing of Books'

'More and more words are spoken, saying less and less. More and more is said but there is less listening than ever. What we call the communications society is precisely a society which has done to death anything one could call communication.'

(Gerrit Komrij)

The rate at which we in our present-day society are bombarded by ever-changing standards, technical advances and mind-stretching knowledge has produced an overspill of information. Information which is poured out via new and traditional media on an anonymous audience. We never have time to question content or identity. The majority of the information flow is superficial, a quality inherent in the fleeting nature and limitations of the media used.

Unruffled by the winds blowing through the media, books stand firm. No other medium is better suited for conveying knowledge, facts, ideas and subjective fiction in such a searching and comprehensive way. Better than any other medium, books provide the permanent building bricks of culture, science, education and historical records. Books are still by far the most practical medium through which to communicate at a high level on any subject with a relatively small group of people. It is still possible to produce an edition of one thousand or even less — on the grounds that one knows that genuine purchasers exist — without having to invest any extra money. This fact gives us a guarantee that particular ideas will continue to find their way to people through books. It means in practice that anyone who has anything essential to say can use a book as a platform for disseminating his ideas. And conversely, anyone who is looking for any kind of specialist information can always take it for granted that there have been, or will be, books written on the subject. The only question is whether the potential reader can still find his way to the book or choice of books among the wide diversity of books on offer; proficiency in reading and in using books is on the decline. With the advent of the new media and the increased tempo of life in our society and the information flowing over it, the role of books is in danger of becoming a passive one.

Following on from these observations, there is the further threat of a change in the 'normal' flow of books of many different kinds, a change which could very well create problems for the 'minority book', the 'non-popular' title whose publication is hardly, if at all, accompanied by predictable publicity and success-promoting sales techniques.

For, that the availability of books — both their production and their physical presence at sales outlets — is more and more under pressure in the free economic process of supply and demand, no one can now deny; sales figures indicate a definite decline. A drop in the average expendable income of the consumer, the growing popularity of other, often passive, media and the aggressive competition of other leisure pursuits are the most tangible factors responsible for this increased pressure.

As a result of such changes, the book industry is already confronted by falling profits and the necessity to tailor the supply to a declining demand. The cries which are nevertheless emerging at an increasing rate from the booksellers, all stem from one essential problem which is beginning to take on frightening proportions: the average life of a book is becoming shorter. As a result, publishers and bookshops can no longer keep the balance between cultural motives and the economic pressure which changing market conditions exert on their business.

The present position of books would, however, be a great deal worse without the protective measures which the government has taken on a number of crucial points: for example without the imposition of a fixed price the arsenal of specialised book sales outlets and the variety of books on sale would long ago have been decimated. Practical experience in Sweden and France has already shown that the average price would rise considerably in a free market. Yet the fact that even the fixed price of books can continue to be undermined by the lack of any internationally harmonised regulation within the EC remains a source of anxiety. (In spite of long years of well-substantiated pleas — both by governments and trade organi-

sations in the various member states and by their representatives in the European Parliament — for an EC regulation to fix prices, no definite regulation has ever materialised; the economic view of books as such appears to outweigh any conscious choice in favour of books as cultural products with the European Commission).

All this makes it obvious how elementary it is that the government should evaluate the cultural function of books correctly and at the same time realise the consequences of the economic climatic factors which threaten the position of books as cultural products. Only when a government can and will recognise how particularly vulnerable books are from every point of view, can it create adequate fringe benefits which — without directly interfering in the actual functioning of the book industry — nevertheless offer the necessary protection to keep quality books on the shelves. The purpose of this introduction is to aid that recognition of the vulnerable position books occupy in the market place.

The authors have attempted to link up their own views and observations of the developments in the book market generally with the tendencies reported through contacts with colleagues in other countries. There are great differences, however, in the composition of book markets in the various EC countries, differences which the writers have not been able to spell out but will probably become obvious in the course of this conference.

#### **Current market tendencies in general books**

In 1987, anyone who casts a penetrating eye behind the scenes in the book industry will see that, as against a fall in demand, there is an extraordinarily large supply of books, both as regards variety and volume. The years of 'overproduction' have not yet passed. In general, one may say that the number produced but so far unsold is three or four times greater than the actual demand. Altogether, one could say that the value of the stocks the average publisher has lying in his warehouse is equal to the amount of his book sales for a year. This is a highly undesirable situation in which book producers find themselves against their better judgment. And why? In a sentence, the problem is this: the book trade is the only one which markets many thousands of relatively low-priced, different new products every year, products which each have a character of their own, which have to be developed individually and for which a suitable marketing strategy must be devised. A puzzle without a solution...?

#### **Changes in the consumer market**

First of all the consumer market is a complex one. In general we may say that a relatively small top layer of the total market potential is formed by the genuine users of books for whom books are a permanent feature of their lives. In the Sixties and Seventies, under the influence of increased prosperity and improved education, another substantial layer of impulse book-buyers was added, whose interest was chiefly in the popular types of fiction and non-fiction. The majority of these buyers however, fell away again during the Eighties. The group of loyal book-buyers who have remained now varies between 20% and one third of the total population, an estimate which in all probability is somewhat lower in the southerly countries of the EC. A structural problem for the book trade, however, is still that there is no 'permanent', 'general' market, just as 'the' book consumer no longer exists. There are innumerable large, small and medium-sized, constantly changing, sub-markets. There are people who go into bookshops and people one will hardly ever see in one, people with extremely specialised reading requirements and people who, once in a blue moon, buy a general type of book. There are those for whom the price of a book is not important and people for whom buying a book is a special event, preceded by a great many deliberations. Some markets are easily delineated, others not at all.

Briefly, the same book may be bought by a large number of people for many different reasons. More than ever, however, it is the amount of publicity which surrounds a book from the moment it appears which influences sales. This explains a huge interest in a relatively small number of literary novels which attract

attention. A book by a well-known author, a book discussed in a television programme, a book reviewed in influential newspapers or political journals, a book which is filmed, a book which appears in connection with some impressive or topical event, that's the book which has every chance of success. A book, however, which appears without publicity 'extras' — even though the publisher may advertise it intensively — is hardly noticed, if at all, in the tremendous flow of books and in most cases doomed to die a 'cot death'. Only when a book satisfies a reader's specialist requirements (though trend and publicity factors may have an even stronger influence), does it appear that he is ready to disregard the price. Generally speaking, however, the average sum spent on buying a book is decreasing. 'Books are expensive' is one of the arguments most commonly advanced by the consumer for not buying books. Publishers try to take this price awareness into account by marketing cheap series and reprints but then at the same time find themselves forced to make do with smaller profits. For every government that takes the idea of 'spreading culture' seriously, the price awareness of the consumer ought to be a deciding factor in giving books a Nil rating of VAT. In any case, all along the long production and distribution line of every book there will be a multiplicity of VAT charges of every kind which work their way through into the ultimate retail price.

### **Publishers under pressure**

In the second place, there are the half-intuitive, half-economic considerations which a publisher puts side by side in making the decision whether or not to launch a book on the market. To begin with, among the items to be considered, the composition of the cost price is a deciding factor. For an average book this might be specified as follows:

10% to the author

25% technical costs (typesetting, lithography, printing, binding)

10% publishing costs (editing, production, financing)

55% sales and distribution costs (of which 40% is retail margin; 8% physical distribution and warehousing; 7% promotion)

All this is exclusive of VAT.

The amount of investment required in advance for a book is very nearly half the ultimate price to the public which means — to avoid an absolute loss — that at least a half to two-thirds of every edition must be sold, based on normal retail discount margins. Under current conditions of financing, a publisher is forced to recoup his investment in a book within a year and a half.

In fixing the consumer price of a book the above costs, it is true, play a large part but so, too, does the psychological price awareness which could prevent the potential buyer from purchasing the book. The knowledge that the production costs per copy are reduced the more copies one issues gives rise to the publishers' dilemma: how many/in what form/at what price?

This is the crux of the matter: in order to publish certain titles at a profit the estimated number of copies to be sold through the bookseller is too small. Yet in many cases a publisher will decide to increase the number to what he considers a profitable number, thus leaving himself open to the risk of not being able to sell the 'overproduction'. The publisher 'counts on' additional sales outlets, he 'counts on' an increased level of public interest, i.e. he hopes for these things. His decision is often a short-term view; with the necessary consequences. For years publishers could predict the sales returns of their books in very general terms: 10% would become bestsellers, 30% to 40% would pay for themselves and 50% would make a loss. By means of internal subsidising, the end result achieved was sufficient or just sufficient profit to keep them going, up to the moment when the odds on the book market began to change. Publishers tried, while angling for the 10% bestsellers, to deal with a declining demand by publishing a wider range of titles in the hope of keeping up their incomes. This, naturally, did not work. The booksellers, the media and the general public were flooded out with so many, often too superficial kinds of books that many titles came and went almost unnoticed.

As a result of this wider range of titles on offer, the bookshops were forced to become more selective in their purchasing. There was often less demand for backlist titles or reprints of quality publications from the bookseller's side while it was these elements of the publisher's total returns which made his operation profitable. All in all, a situation has developed in which an average, non-headline-hitting book's sales prospects are extinguished within a couple of months; three quarters of the new books on offer are hardly moving at all by the end of one year. The result is that publishers are left with warehouses full of unsold stock in which money has been invested; money without which they can no longer work. For the majority of these book stocks, between a half and a third remains unsold after two years. There comes a point when there is often no alternative but to sell off such stocks for a fraction of the previous retail price, with the result that when these remainders come on the market, they affect the sales of the healthy new titles, or even jeopardise them, and, additionally, they help to undermine the consumer's notion of the cost of producing books. A publisher who does not want his good name and/or that of his author to be tarnished by the image created by remainders, will decide it is preferable to write off his entire stocks by pulping them.

Taking everything together, the life expectancies of books have gone into a declining spiral which is difficult to break out of: how can you, as a book purveyor, effectively achieve and motivate the market for a straightforward, stable and varied supply of books on the basis of which to extend the average life of your investments so that the need to produce (superfluous?) new titles will be removed? Only when the book trade is capable of answering this question effectively can a stop be put to the overproduction of titles and copies per edition.

To keep their heads above water, a number of publishers have discovered that several strategic measures must be taken:

- A more selective publishing policy (based on competitor and sales analyses, pre-influencing sales etc.)
- List profiling (including covers, quality and pricing; also the use of recognisable logos, promotions etc.)
- Longer term agreements with customers (groups)
- Smaller editions for more clearly defined sub-markets
- More professional marketing advice
- More careful choice of distribution channels
- Spreading the risk by obtaining sponsorship and/or international co-productions
- Re-exploitation of pictorial/textual material in spin-off publications
- An active reprinting policy (by freshening up covers, once-off offers of cheap reprints)
- Tying in with other media (books popularised by films or television, books published in combination with video and/or sound tapes etc.)

Partly, the publisher will have to do business in a more professional way, work less on beliefs and hopes and possess a better knowledge of the processes which control the market. This is his job if the quality book is not to be allowed to go under. Because it is obvious that it is not easy to subject an economically vulnerable book to the rules outlined just now. 'Keep writing and you'll keep going' is a Dutch adage with which publishers have been familiar for centuries. In future, however, it will be a case of: 'Keep counting and you'll keep going' for the publishers themselves.

### **The ways to the market**

The publisher in the Netherlands usually tries to market his wares through the following channels: independent booksellers, wholesale booksellers, purchasing groups for independent booksellers, chain bookstores, one book club, several book clubs, direct sales (by direct mailing, order campaigns or to industry) and remainder sales.

In contrast to most of the other EC countries, in the Netherlands the sales through the large stores, supermarkets, chainstores and coffee shops play only a small part;

the huge volumes of popular titles which are sold through these channels in Britain, Germany, Italy and Spain are a phenomenon which is almost unknown in this country, with the exception of the odd title which forms part of a special advertising campaign for some product.

The same applies to door-to-door sales. The results achieved by this, especially in Italy, France and Spain — particularly with reference books — are an indication of a difference in educational standards, income levels and the number of bookshops. 'Buying knowledge' by acquiring an expensive series of beautifully bound volumes is something which is now very rare in this country. It is also interesting that the role of the book clubs in the Netherlands — having for years been much more dominant than in other European countries — has significantly declined. Here, too, this is the result of the general decline in the market for books. The position of the book clubs (up to 1985 there were only four left), however, has been further suppressed by recent trading restrictions which have been imposed on book clubs by the booktrade. These have reduced the scope with which the clubs were able to operate in the Dutch market to proportions more comparable with the manner in which book clubs in other countries have always operated. Since then there has been much less direct competition between them and the booksellers.

Within the area limited by the Dutch language, which already imposes quantitative restrictions on the sales of books, an absolute bestseller is a book which sells 100,000 or more copies in 1 to 1½ years, but this enviable position is enjoyed by only two or three books at the most each year. Average editions of 'reasonable sellers' are between 7,500 and 15,000 copies and 'cautious sellers' between 3,500 and 6,000 copies sold. However, publishers are more and more opting, on the basis of their sales returns, for 'safe' editions of 2,500 to 3,000 copies at the most, in order to safeguard themselves against the 'warehouse syndrome'.

A book's chances of success are partly dependent on the publisher's reputation and credibility and his acceptance by the book reviewers and booksellers. In this respect, a list with a good image still evokes the best response in the form of reviews and the willingness of booksellers to stock such titles.

The purchasing patterns of the libraries (every library in the Netherlands decides for itself which titles it will or will not add to its collection) is in fact influenced by the same factors. With orders for 100 to 1,500 copies (although the latter only happens occasionally), sales to libraries can have a definite influence on the sales figures of any edition.

In the Netherlands there is an extremely functional distribution system, unique in the world, for the book trade: from one warehouse, the Central Book Warehouse, practically the whole range of books in the Dutch language can be efficiently supplied and delivered. The result is, however, that at the book fairs, where publishers introduce their forthcoming publications to the booksellers, the bookshops usually limit their orders to single copies of average books and larger numbers of predictable bestsellers. The purchase of a single copy of each title, and increasingly this is all that is sold, is made in the knowledge that books for which there may turn out to be a greater demand from the public can be quickly re-ordered and delivered within a few days from the Central Book Warehouse. Dutch bookshops can therefore, because of this centralised and speedy delivery system, stock a wide variety of titles in which there is also room for the 'minority' book. In the case of new books, the bookshops order between 400 and 1000 copies (although that is a large order) of the ordinary titles. This shows clearly how great is the risk which the publisher carries.

If we review the developments which have taken place over the past fifteen years in the publishing world, we see that the economic crisis has left its deepest mark on the large publishing houses. The reason for this is the fact that the alertness which is essential for an effective publishing strategy, on the one hand, and the economically induced tendency to produce on an ever larger scale which is typical of such businesses, on the other, seldom go together harmoniously. Anyone who reviews



the current potential of the publishing houses will realise that the strongest are those producing stable and familiar lines, in other words, those who have a familiar image as far as the authors, booksellers and readers are concerned. These are practically always publishers whose major sales outlets are the bookshops.

#### **The bookshops as a quality outlet**

Thirdly, there is the **bookseller** as the most direct link in the commercial chain between writer and reader. The present financial position of the average traditional bookshop may be called alarming: almost half of the bookshops operating independently are making a loss or at best breaking even. On a smaller scale, the same thing is happening to the booksellers as to the publishers. They are carrying stocks which are too large (and, in particular, too varied) while demand is falling; they have a traditional, rather passive approach to marketing and are not in a position to break out of the downward profit spiral. To the outside world this inability is visible in the fact that bookshops are disappearing and others appearing which combine buying and selling. Partly under the influence of this combination of forces, their attitude towards the publishers has become more rigid, they buy more selectively and insist on better conditions and profit margins. These book combines are essential in order to prevent the bulk buyers from shouldering them out of the market altogether.

The physical limitations of bookshop floorspace often force the bookseller to make a selection from the huge volume of books on offer. This is a difficult and time-consuming job in which — yet again — the balance must be struck between economic and cultural/intuitive motivation: understandably and necessarily so, since a book with a low rate of turnover does not 'earn' the shelf space it takes up. A general rule, any book which sells less than four copies a year is, economically speaking, too expensive for the bookseller to keep in stock. This is one of the reasons why bookshops clear out their stocks quickly by the holding of sales. The goal is to have an assortment which satisfies the requirements of a quick turnover and profitability and which — once the balance is found — can subsidise a certain number of risk-bearing titles, even though the purchasing policy may be to look first at the sales potential of any book and only in the second place at its qualities.

One may wonder whether the publishers, who now watch these developments with alarm, have not themselves laid the foundation for this attitude on the part of the bookseller. The crucial issue in their communications is still a matter of quantity like numbers, conditions and margins, but between the parties an incomprehensible vacuum remains. It is as if neither the publisher nor the retailer will admit that the latter has an inestimable source of market information: a shop in which he can have daily and direct contact with the consumer. In this sense the shop itself is the most important medium of communication in the chain of efforts to focus the consumer's attention on books. Neither the bookseller nor the publisher knows how to collect this market information professionally and translate it into concrete product development, sales strategies and promotions. A proof of the effects which a motivated and personal marketing approach and sales support in the bookshop can have is not difficult to find: a growing number of exclusive publications by the booksellers themselves are achieving sales figures which would make the ordinary publisher jealous. The same applies to the promotions organised by the booksellers (or groups of booksellers) in which brochures, guides and advertisements with direct follow-up in the shop are producing better sales figures than similar promotions initiated by the publishers.

It would also appear from an analysis of the sales figures of individual booksellers that outlets which actively and consistently set out to meet their own market demands, do much better than their more passive colleagues. It is obvious that anyone who makes the effort to familiarise himself with the behaviour and capricious preferences of his potential clientele and can develop convincing methods of appealing to the consumer's buying/reading interests, will reap the rewards. In spite of this, most of the initiative is still left to the consumer. In the period just past, the book trade has given a large measure of its attention to matters like rationalising

the time-consuming and expensive influx of bookstocks but very little of the time saved in this way has been used to make a more active approach to the circle of potential customers.

In fact it is not only booksellers who should make the choice but the whole commercial book industry should do so: the conscious choice to be a part of a circuit in which cultural and commercial motives together form the incentive to activity.

However, there are no books without readers. The book industry will only be able to carry out its cultural task, supported by timely government policies which create favourable conditions, if there is a sufficiently large demand for books from the readers. Action here must therefore come from the other side, from the reader. Only by concentrating an increasing number of educational and cultural programmes on books and reading can one hope to succeed in counteracting the developments which now threaten them.

What can the government do to make people more receptive and motivated towards reading? Apart from the educational system, the libraries can play a more effective role. In some senses the libraries are also guilty of the same inward-looking attitude to the market as the booksellers and publishers, in spite of increased numbers of books lent out. The accusation made by the book trade against the libraries that they represent unfair competition by making books available to readers either free or at very low membership rates, must be seen as an admission of weakness. One could claim for at least an equal number of reasons that libraries are a breeding ground for the reading habit and for opening up people's minds to books.

One may perhaps object to the fact that the way libraries work is so completely divorced from the commercial book circuit. Neither the education system nor the libraries provide any ways in which to lay down lines of communication with the books currently on offer in bookshops and in this way to help motivate the reader to **buy** books and to build up his own collection of books. If the government wishes to help to rehabilitate the book industry, its real task will be to create in the potential reader the required motivation, interest in, and appreciation of, books.

### Propositions

- 1 In today's society, with its tendency towards superficiality, there is a danger that books may become a neglected medium. The popularity of reading as a leisure pursuit is on the decline, and expenditure on books by members of the public has likewise structurally declined (on average, people also have less disposable income than they once did). Moreover, the success or failure of books is increasingly determined by the influence of publicity and literary trends. As a result of all this, the shelf-life of books is becoming shorter. The fall in demand and the polarisation of interest on the part of readers entail a risk that it may eventually no longer be possible to take for granted the availability of a wide range of books which are of cultural value.
- 2 Whereas for centuries the book trade was able to perform its cultural functions virtually without any direct government assistance, it is now essential for government to provide concrete support in order for it to continue to perform these functions. Particularly now that the book trade is having to operate under growing pressure, the great importance of the various measures which government has taken to create favourable conditions for it is becoming apparent. These measures have included library borrowing fees, reproduction fees, promotion of a fixed price system, privatisation of publishing and keeping VAT on books as low as possible. The best way in which government could now help the book trade would be by promoting books and reading in society, thus creating active and growing demand among readers and buyers of books.

- 3 By pursuing a coherent policy under which all potential avenues are explored in the fields of education, culture, social and cultural work, the media and libraries with a view to encouraging and preserving interest in, and appreciation of books and reading, government could help to maintain the basis which is necessary in order for the book trade to operate in a balanced fashion.

In drawing up a coherent policy plan for books and reading along these lines, government should review the practical capabilities, suggestions and experience of:

- a) participants in the book trade and allied sectors, the education sector, library work, the media, and social and cultural workers;
  - b) those who have undertaken similar activities abroad.
- 4 Government should provide tax concessions to assist participants in the book trade who demonstrably promote or practise the production, dissemination and preservation of books of cultural value and of trade in them, in the following ways:
- a) booksellers who pursue a deliberate policy of stocking cultural works (which often do not sell so well) should be entitled to tax concessions based on the value of their stock;
  - b) publishers who keep cultural works in stock longer than is warranted in economic terms should be entitled to similar tax concessions.
- 5 Libraries should be encouraged to buy cultural books as a matter of purchasing policy. Procurement subsidies should be available to them for this purpose. An action plan for libraries should be drawn up in consultation with commercial booksellers to encourage readers to buy books.
- 6 Governments of EC Member States should both individually and collectively make a deliberate decision in favour of books as cultural products, and should subordinate economic considerations to cultural ones in this connection. A decision along these lines should be reflected in the following action:
- governments should ensure that international trade in books can be carried on both unrestricted and with the aid of protective measures on the basis of a fixed book price for all EC Member States.
  - at the very least, a pragmatic agreement should be reached without delay for language areas extending to more than one country as a first step towards a fixed book price for all EC Member States.
  - no VAT of any kind should be levied on books.
  - the position of books should be at least as advantageous as that of other more recent media, and comparable EC budgets should be earmarked for book research and development.
  - functional taxation and import and export facilities should be developed to encourage international coproduction of books in EC Member States.

International Conference 'Books and Literacy:  
a response to new developments'.  
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Working group IV

The promotion of reading and literacy

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**Authors: Saskia B. Tellegen-Van Delft - Jan de Zanger**

Curriculum Vitae

Saskia B. Tellegen-van Delft studied psychology at the University of Utrecht and the University of Amsterdam, graduating in 1971 with a degree in psychology, with behavioural studies as her special subject. After receiving her degree, she worked for a number of years in child care and educational documentation. Since 1965 she has worked at the Baschwitz Institute for Mass Psychology and Public Opinion, first as an editorial assistant on the *POLLS* International Review of Public Opinion and more recently as a staff researcher. She has also taught psychology at the University of Maryland and mass communications at the University of Ohio.

Jan de Zanger, author of children's books and chairman of the Netherlands section of *IBBY*, is employed by the Curriculum Development Foundation (Stichting Leerplan-ontwikkeling). His principal fields of interest are the role of books in schools and the promotion of reading among young people.



Considerations: Why, how and where?

Recommendations: education, access to books, research.

### **Encouraging reading: why?**

#### **a Functioning in society; the importance of reading**

For centuries, the written word has been one of the most important sources of 'learning and pleasure' and has retained its pre-eminence despite the development of other media. In 20th century western society, the ability to read has become so important that people who do not possess adequate reading skills find it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to function properly.

At one time, people who were illiterate had little or no chance of a successful job or career. Now they have great difficulty in coping with simple everyday tasks. Virtually every type of occupation or job demands the ability to deal with written information, technical instructions, explanations or descriptions. If supermarkets replace small shops and markets completely, it will even be impossible to buy food without being able to read.

In a democratic society, universal suffrage is based on the assumption that every voter is capable of forming an opinion. This requires the ability to locate and assimilate various types of information such as newspaper articles and the manifestos of political parties. Learning basic reading skills is therefore one of the most important aspects of primary education and marks the first step towards adequate reading behaviour.

Recently we have come to recognise that illiteracy is still present in all the member states of the European Communities, despite wide-ranging educational facilities. Depending on the definition, it is estimated that between 1% and 4% of the Dutch population are illiterate. In Portugal, illiteracy is particularly acute among people aged 50 and above, 60% of whom cannot read or write. The number of semi-illiterates — people whose reading age is equivalent to or less than that of an average pupil in the third year of primary school — is even higher. Such people can only use written language to express themselves in a meaningful way to a very limited extent. In the United Kingdom, 5% of all adults, excluding migrants and the mentally handicapped function at this level. In the Netherlands, the figure is 10%-20%<sup>1</sup>). The great interest shown by society in the problem may well go some way towards explaining its apparent increase. If the criteria used to determine literacy continue to rise, while reading skills remain at the same level, more and more people will be classified as having inadequate skills.

The first stage of literacy consists of acquiring basic reading skills. The second involves nurturing the individual's capacity to deal with different types of written material, so that he/she is capable of finding necessary information at the appropriate time and can absorb, arrange and interpret its contents.

This involves an ability to understand and assimilate non-fiction and to enjoy different types of written matter, including fiction. Reading for pleasure may help the reader cope or develop emotionally and intellectually. Fiction (imaginative prose and poetry) challenges us as readers to see beyond the words and interpret the reality they describe using our own imagination and experience. Books are therefore an important way of helping us to understand ourselves and other people in relation to the world and society and of learning to understand other cultures in our own society from the inside.

#### **b Functioning as individuals; the importance of reading**

Reading, particularly reading fiction has been described as producing a 'temporary release of human bondage'. Why should this 'temporary release' and the contribution which reading fiction makes towards it be so important at the present time?

There is this frantic pace of modern life and the danger of 'information overload'.

Modern western society is time-obsessed; modern man is in a desperate hurry. Recent developments in the media such as cable television and satellite broadcasting, have given rise to the problem of 'information overload'. Like the tools of the sorcerer's apprentice, they create new opportunities, but at the same time overwhelm ordinary people with a plethora of information. There is no reason to suppose that if people cannot cope with the sheer volume of information now they will ever be able to do so in the future. In order to avoid being swamped in a tidal wave of information or at the very least of having our senses numbed we must be able to call this process to a halt from time to time. When major national disasters occur at intervals of several years, we feel great sympathy for the victims. If, however, we are constantly bombarded by the media with details of catastrophes all over the world, our capacity to respond becomes diminished. To experience on a frequent basis the kind of strong emotions which such events provoke would render us incapable of functioning properly in our own daily lives. We need regular opportunities to escape from the pressure of 'information overload' and the frenetic pace of modern life. Reading books, especially works of fiction, provides us with such an opportunity.

A passage taken from the work of the Dutch novelist, Maarten 't Hart, effectively illustrates this point:

'When I was a child, I had only one aim when I read a book: to forget my own world, myself, my everyday circumstances completely. And the best way was to read an exciting book. Then you left the world behind ... Why shouldn't a book take you out of yourself ... If you're waiting for something or on a long flight, why shouldn't you want to forget the passage of time. There's another way of getting away from yourself completely: watching a film. But you can't carry a film around with you ...'.<sup>2)</sup>

This passage clearly describes the 'temporary release of human bondage' which takes place when we read a book. Fiction in particular fires the imagination, helps us grasp new ideas and stimulates our mental processes. It can therefore make a significant contribution to our emotional, intellectual and creative development as individuals. This happens not only when we read critically and dispassionately, but more especially as 't Hart describes it, when we immerse ourselves completely in a book, forgetting ourselves and our immediate preoccupations. In recent years, research in several fields has confirmed the special nature and specific value of reading fiction.

#### **The psychophysiological dimension**

Reading factual texts to obtain information involves certain intellectual processes. But our mental faculties are engaged in a different way when we read 'stories, not so fact-filled which include metaphor and imagery and elements of emotion, surprise, humour'. The first type of reading (factual texts for information) uses the left hemisphere of the brain, that is described as 'a logical, analytic and sequential processor.' This type of reading requires the ability to think logically and an awareness of time. Reading imaginative fiction on the other hand uses the right hemisphere of the brain, 'a holistic, Gestalt and diffused processor for which spatial forms and music are more suited ... the right hemisphere has a greater role than the left in processing emotional and imagic material'.<sup>3)</sup> The psychophysiological fact that reading fiction goes hand in hand with a marked emphasis on spatial forms, imagination and emotion and less emphasis on logic and time-related thinking, explains how it produces a liberating effect.

Research into how teenagers and adults use the media has led to the following considerations. Reading often goes hand in hand with a lively imagination, with a personal way of empathising and a capacity to become emotionally involved. In this respect books have distinct advantages over any other medium<sup>4)</sup>, simply because they affect individuals more strongly. Fiction can evoke visual images, sounds and smells without actually reproducing them. It appeals to our senses

through the descriptive power of words. We are free to identify with people or situations in a way which is not possible with other media. This is partly because reading allows us to set our own pace, unlike a visit to the theatre, listening to the radio or watching television, where the timescale is predetermined. The reader can give free rein to his associations without being pressurised by external factors or time considerations. A book therefore stimulates an active imagination.

Einstein emphasised the importance of this when he said: 'Imagination is more important than knowledge.' Even so, the importance of fantasy and imagination was underestimated for many years. Under the influence of psychoanalysis, fantasy came to be regarded as a kind of illness. Freud for example declared that 'happy people do not make fantasies, only unsatisfied ones do so.' This thesis has been rejected in the second half of the twentieth century.

Development psychologists now say that 'childhood fantasy is the starting point for creative thinking; scientific, mathematical and philosophical thinking all have a fantasy component. Contrary to the assumptions of intuitive psychology, a reasonable amount of fantasy activity is essential to full realisation of intellectual potential.'<sup>5</sup>) Experimental work has confirmed that fantasy in young children can lead to greater resilience in later life.<sup>6</sup>) Conversely, criminology studies have shown that delinquent adolescents are notably deficient in fantasy: 'Their thought world appears as a rather barren place.'<sup>7</sup>) In a completely different field, the American Navy Survival School stressed the valuable role fantasy and imagination can play to combat claustrophobia, as early as the 1950s. Members of the armed forces have reason to be grateful for being taught how to make practical use of their imagination in this way.<sup>8</sup>) If therefore, the power of imaginative thought is considered to be so important in such diverse fields and if the printed word stimulates the imagination more than any other medium, then clearly reading has incomparable value.

But how do we set about encouraging people to read? To encourage reading, we need to have more information about potential readers — their reading skills, motivation, reading behaviour and preferences — and about the books available in book shops, in libraries, in schools, and in the home. This information could be obtained by consulting teachers, librarians, booksellers and publishers, but though valuable, it would necessarily be incomplete, since such people often come into contact with readers but rarely with people who never or seldom read. Research into the above topics is therefore needed to identify the specific factors which affect the reading behaviour of different target groups.

These could for instance include the so-called 'forgotten target groups', consisting of 15-20 year olds and the elderly in the Netherlands, or 11-16 year olds in Belgium. Another category might consist of children of Turkish and Moroccan origin living in north west Europe. These children enjoy reading fairy tales more often and until they are much older than other children, who tend to turn their back on fairy tales from about the age of 10. If these classifications are valid and if they adversely affect reading habits, one of the ways of encouraging reading would be to publish special titles for the 'forgotten groups' and to make sure they are readily available.

Another target group consists of people who do not regard reading as an enjoyable pastime in its own right, although they often read non-fiction on subjects which interest them. To such people, reading is a means to an end, such as acquiring information or increasing their own prestige. Encouraging these people to read more may mean modifying the range of books available, but equally it will mean recognising their motives for reading as valid. Reading can also be encouraged in other ways, such as removing obstacles to choice. For example the traditional linkage between age groups and genres is unsatisfactory. Children's books also interest older people and conversely children enjoy reading informative publications for adults.



The table below lists items borrowed from the public Library at Baarn, a medium-sized municipality in the Netherlands<sup>9)</sup> together with the ages of the readers who borrowed them.

### Number of items borrowed per age group (in %)

base: all items borrowed on 23 November 1986

Age:	0-10 years	11-13 years	14-17 years	18-23 years	24+ more	total
Number:	2425	1251	1718	1339	7686	14419
children's books	94.5	80.7	20.8	4.9	2.5	27.1
adult books	5.2	18.2	73.7	83.9	93.8	69.0
non-book materials	0.3	1.1	5.5	11.1	3.8	3.8
	100	100	100	100	100	100
children's fiction	73.3	61.8	16.4	3.9	1.4	20.7
children's non-fiction	21.2	18.9	4.4	1.0	1.1	6.4
adult non-literary fiction	3.0	8.8	24.7	34.0	58.1	38.3
adult literary fiction	2.0	8.5	20.4	31.8	22.5	18.4
non-book materials	0.3	1.1	5.5	11.1	3.8	3.8
	100	100	100	100	100	100

The table confirms that, given the opportunity, children borrow adult books and vice versa.

Experiments are currently in progress which classify books by theme rather than by genre, with the aim of making it easier for readers, particularly inexperienced ones, to select appropriate reading matter. 'Adolescent Female Portraits in the American Novel 1961-1981' arranges book titles by subject e.g. friendship, the arts, heroism, careers, rather than dividing them into children's books, books for young people, popular or literary fiction etc.<sup>10)</sup> These genres are of course included: for example Kristin Hunter's 'Soul brothers and Sister Lou', Philip Roth's 'When she was Good', Sylvia Plath's 'The Bell Jar', Judy Blume's 'Tiger Eyes', Richard Brautigan's 'The Abortion', Jacqueline Susann's 'Valley of the Dolls' and Judith Krantz's 'Princess Daisy'.

The above selection comprises books of different quality and different levels of accessibility. But 'Adolescent Female Portraits' implicitly questions the idea that books can be divided into two categories: popular novels for entertainment and serious novels which teach the reader something. Rather than this kind of polarisation, it makes more sense to think in terms of a sliding scale on which some novels will have more to offer certain readers under certain circumstances than others. The place on the scale will always depend on when and how the author and reader come into contact with one another. Neither books nor readers can be divided into two simple categories. Peter H. Mann has this to say on the subject: 'It must be recognised that the two types of novel used as categories in the above analysis are polar types and thus a distortion of empirical reality. One would be foolish to expect all the books one reads to fall into one or other extreme category. Indeed publishers, booksellers and public librarians are constantly on the look-out for authors who can write good 'middle of the road' fiction which finds a balance between the serious and the popular.'<sup>11)</sup> See also excerpt a.

'Die p z e e', the Dutch magazine of literature teaching, devotes each issue to a particular theme in fiction such as leave-taking or the mother figure. This provides pupils, who are often more interested in the subject rather than the style or author, a more convenient way of choosing what they want to read.<sup>12)</sup> The Netherlands Library and Literature Centre is experimenting with a classification system in

which a single theme is presented from different angles in different media e.g. an illustrated book of fairy tales combined with an audio or video tape. Audio-visual media can also stimulate an interest in reading. The idea that they have a negative influence on reading is unproven and should therefore be used with caution (see excerpt b). The use of several media together may in fact have a positive effect.

The same applies to different types of printed media. In the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, reading skills and reading behaviour have been boosted by using the 'newspaper in the classroom' programme.<sup>13)</sup> Audio-visual media can create more opportunities to transfer knowledge and this encourages children to read. The teaching of literature can also be enlivened by audio-visual media e.g. cassettes of poetry readings and video tapes on different book-related subjects. Video tapes in particular offer a wealth of new opportunities for the teaching of literature.

### **Encouraging reading: where?**

#### **Education**

New schemes are being developed in primary schools to supplement traditional reading teaching (where each pupil reads in turn while the others listen), or to replace it with new types of lessons.<sup>14)</sup> Generally speaking, the emphasis in primary education is still on the technical side of reading. Similarly, traditional literature teaching tends to emphasise a standard interpretation of the text based on defining what the writer is trying to say. Both types of teaching can be counter-productive and stifle motivation or pleasure in reading.

The new approach aims to encourage pupils to continue reading in their own free time at the end of the school day, during the holidays or after they have left school for good. It seeks to enable them to choose their own reading matter based on personal preferences, to respond to it in their own way, while recognising the usefulness and if possible the pleasure of reading.

The above aims have several consequences as far as teaching is concerned. Room must be created for recreational reading programmes in schools. Different kinds of books must be available to allow pupils to make their own choices at such times.<sup>15)</sup> Teachers must be aware that a library of books is more than a media resources library. In a media resources library the emphasis is on the usefulness of books. In the library proper, the emphasis should be on the pleasure of reading.

Secondary schools devote relatively little time to the teaching of literature, and where they do, it is often not in a way that encourages reading. In the future, literature must be taught so as to develop a feeling for style, an appreciation of different narrative techniques and an awareness of the fact that reality can be described by creative writers in many different ways. This involves responding to features of literature which are also present in other linguistic forms. An important aspect of teaching literature consists of encouraging children to use language creatively, for example in creative writing assignments and language association games. This type of activity stimulates an awareness of how language is used in literature (including children's literature). Conversely, reading literature has a beneficial effect on the reader's own use of language. This practical approach emphasises the fact that the teaching of literature cannot be divorced from good language teaching and, generally speaking, is a more effective way of stimulating reading than the traditional chronological/analytical method. At present, lists of set texts are often used with a lack of imagination.

Several organisations are attempting to promote this new approach. They include the Friedrich Bodeker Kreis in the Federal Republic of Germany and Schrijvers School Samenleving in the Netherlands. Part of their work consists of bringing authors and readers into contact with one another inside and outside school.

#### **Libraries**

Libraries have a vital role to play in any policy designed to encourage reading.

There is no other place where readers come into contact with books with so few obligations. Libraries contain all kinds of books and do not make any demands as to how borrowers should respond to them. A book borrowed from a library does not have to be read in full or discussed, unlike books used in schools. Browsing does not mean any obligation to buy, unlike in a book shop.

Danish and Dutch research confirms the important role played by libraries. In 1965, legislation was introduced in Denmark requiring every municipality to set up and maintain a public library with a children's section. When the act came into force, borrowing of children's books went up in leaps and bounds. In 1969, as many children's books as adult books were borrowed. But what is more important, when these children grew up in the 1980s they were still reading more than other generations. It should be added that at the same time that children's libraries were extended, changes were introduced into primary schools including more 'recreational reading' programmes. (See excerpt c).

In the Netherlands, considerable success has been achieved by providing free library membership facilities for children and young people and by organising library campaigns to stimulate reading. The latter include direct activities aimed at parents and children and indirect methods involving cooperation with educational and welfare services which provide information or materials. <sup>16)</sup> Although there is no evidence to confirm it, the impression exists that children have become more familiar with quality books (e.g. books by Thea Beckman and Roald Dahl) since free library membership was introduced.

#### **Book shops**

Book shops naturally wish to encourage reading and do so in a number of ways, for example by organising book weeks or children's book weeks. The retail trade is also increasingly involved in activities organised by public libraries, as the idea continues to gain wide acceptance that libraries and book shops are complementary to one another.

At present, people who read a lot are more likely to buy books. Peter H. Mann once remarked that the best place for a book shop is in the foyer of a library.

Cooperation between book shops and libraries could be to the advantage of both. We should not forget that the work of libraries would not be possible if book shops did not exist.

#### **The Media**

We need to know more about how articles in magazines and programmes on television about books influence book buying and the reading habits of the general public. However, it is fair to assume that book reviews are read largely by people who read a lot anyway, so their influence is limited to encouraging such people to buy one book rather than another. It is regrettable that so few reviews of books for children and young people appear in the majority of Member States. This makes it difficult for parents and teachers to keep in touch with new titles and trends. Book sales are considerably boosted when prizes are announced, when books are made into films or when authors are interviewed.

#### **Books in the home**

The attitude of parents is vitally important. Children will be encouraged to read from an early age if their parents read aloud to them and have books in the home. A tradition of reading in the family actively fosters a positive attitude to books and helps children develop their own reading style. Grandparents and parents who enjoy reading and are familiar with books provide an invaluable stimulus for children to become active readers in their own right.

## **Propositions**

### **Education**

Western society requires its citizens to be experienced readers, capable of independently assimilating different kinds of information and of responding to it effectively.

The consequences of this are as follows:

- everyone should be taught to read; lessons and additional courses should be organised once compulsory education comes to an end;
- lessons and courses must abandon a standard method consisting of reading one book or series per year or per course; this prevents pupils or students from developing into mature readers;
- pupils and students must have access to a wide range of books which they can read in their own time, including fiction and non-fiction, at their own reading level;
- considerable attention must be devoted to teaching literature from the earliest stages of primary education, with the emphasis on self-directed study by pupils;
- literature teaching in secondary schools must move away from a chronological/analytical approach towards a thematic approach geared to providing a wide range of basic texts and flexible use of different reading lists;
- learning to use books should be a part of language teaching. Schools, libraries and bookshops must work together to provide clear information about how to obtain and use books;
- pupils or students should be able to make their own choices at set times;
- the school timetable should include recreational reading periods;
- teachers must be aware of the books available. Knowledge of children's and young people's books should be a compulsory part of primary and secondary teacher training;
- national advisory centres to promote reading should be set up, maintained or expanded; they should supply materials and services which bring books alive e.g. audio-visual aids, visits by authors, book lists etc.

### **Access to books**

This can be achieved in various ways.

#### **Within schools**

- class libraries
- school libraries
- books in class and school libraries loaned from regional or national libraries;
- reading books is part of the curriculum; pupils cannot be expected to pay for it as an extra service.

#### **Within municipalities**

- a library, library bus or part of a collection loaned from, say, a national library;
- part of a collection loaned from a national or regional library could be accommodated in a school, a neighbourhood or community centre or in the town hall;
- if necessary, borrowing can be supervised by trained volunteers.

### **Central organisation and funding of libraries:**

- in the first instance the government should be responsible for central organisation and funding. This means training and appointing librarians and establishing and maintaining basic libraries and loans from regional and national libraries;
- sponsors and volunteers could be used. In Portugal, for example, a network of library buses for children in rural areas has been set up in conjunction with the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. In the Auvergne region of France, libraries have been set up with companies and volunteer librarians trained by the regional branches of the 'Peuple et Culture' organisation. In the Netherlands, Lever Sunlight BV has suggested printing publicity material for libraries on its washing powder and soap packets with coupons which can be cut out and used as contributions towards membership fees.

**Owning books: the most significant way of stimulating reading**

- recognised book shops spread evenly throughout the whole country are indispensable;
- in municipalities where there are no book shops it would be worth considering other alternatives. For example in the UK consideration is being given to Arts Council funding for community bookshops and even second hand bookshops if they are run on a non-profit-making basis;<sup>17)</sup>
- if bookshops combine their activities with different kinds of events they will encourage occasional book-buying (sales which would not otherwise have taken place), even in countries which have a sophisticated network of bookshops;
- if being an experienced reader is a basic requirement of our society, reading is not a luxury; a high level of VAT on books is therefore unacceptable. There is no VAT on books in the United Kingdom, Portugal and Ireland; this example should be followed by other countries. High prices have an adverse effect on sales and seriously threaten the existence of bookshops.

**Distribution systems: general**

- the government is partly responsible for establishing and maintaining distribution systems both in the form of libraries and bookshops, in the public interest.

**Publicity**

- access to books in whatever form should be publicised in the press and the audio-visual media; literary and other events should be organised at national level to launch new publications and reissues and at regional and municipal level to publicise lists of new purchases or parts of national collections which are to be temporarily available in a local area.

**Research**

Reading used to be the prerogative of an elite, now it is available to everyone. Unfortunately, policy on books and reading still contains, explicitly or implicitly, elements which derive from the elitist past. Escarpit, the French writer, commented on this thirty years ago: 'il faut désacraliser la littérature, la libérer de ses tabous sociaux.' Books and readers now have a different place in society. It is up to research workers — on a national basis and also on a comparative basis within the framework of the EC — to indicate what that place is. The groups which need to be encouraged to read are often incapable of helping themselves or making their views known. As Escarpit says: 'ce sont des cultures de masses qui tendent à apparaître avec des exigences qui n'ont pas toujours un langage pour s'exprimer ni des institutions pour se réaliser.'<sup>18)</sup>

Research — in which interviewers and respondents communicate on an equal basis — needs to be carried out to articulate the specific factors which would encourage reading among people who have hitherto been non-readers.

Little of this type of research is currently taking place (see excerpts b and d).

**Cooperation**

Many organisations are concerned with stimulating reading, each from its own angle. Cooperation is the best way of maximising the benefits of these efforts, both on a national basis, and within the framework of the EC, preferably with each organisation retaining its own identity.

## Excerpts

- a) Peter H. Mann: The Novel in British Society. In: Poetics, vol. 12, 1983, p. 435-449.

### More information needed by public

The novel is, basically, a book of fiction telling one story, not a collection of short stories. Even if events or people who appear in the novel are, or were real, the story itself is 'invented'. If we can accept this basis for consideration of the novel it is now possible to go on to consider what we may find **within** the category 'the novel'. By no means are all novels alike. Let us accept that the rather 'serious' novel is exemplified by those books which are reviewed in the more prestigious and serious daily or weekly newspapers and a limited number of weekly or monthly magazines.

In certain groups, usually within the middle or upper middle-class, it can be a mark of social status to be able to converse knowledgeably about the novels one has read recently and, even if one has not read all the books mentioned in a discussion, to be able to identify them from one's reading of reviews is a great help.

The reading of a serious novel is not always simply pleasurable and, indeed, a good novel could well be deeply disturbing.

Research indicates that many people who are seeking for fiction in the public libraries do not have a great deal of knowledge of what to look for and 'literary' novels can be borrowed by people who know neither the author nor the title of the book and are subsequently disappointed with their choice.

Perhaps the public libraries should attempt to inform their readers more about new books being published, but they themselves are now working under tight financial constraint and any extra activity they undertook would have to be done at very low cost.

- b) H. Steinberg: Socio-empirical reading research: a critical report about some revealing surveys. In: Poetics, vol. 17, no. 4/5, November 1983, p. 467-480.

### Reading culture not declining: we just need good comparative research

American experience has already shown that nothing is more practical for the promotion of reading than a sound theory. To reach this aim on an international level we still have a long way to go. The persistence of many prejudices which theoretically have long been overcome ('the young do not read any more', 'reading culture is on the decline', 'the illiterate are well equipped with electronic media') shows how much intellectual effort is still needed in the field of reading. Many of those who speculate about reading presume, consciously or unconsciously, a competition between the media and come up with false findings because of false hypotheses.

The television screen, for instance, permanently promotes reading on a large scale. We need a survey, conducted expertly and across borders. That would require not only a familiarity with the techniques of opinion research and their careful application but also some knowledge of books and especially of the people who read them or who might read them. Research like that could show us the way to better promotion of reading.

- c) M. Jansen: The role of children's and trivial literature in mother tongue teaching seen in the perspective of a changing society. Paper for the International Symposium on Mother Tongue Teaching, Tilburg University, Tilburg, December 1983.

### How to make children read

Four aspects are illuminated:

- 1 How much do Danish children read?
- 2 What do they read?
- 3 What 'ought' they to read?
- 4 And what does the future bring?

- d) S.B. Tellegen-van Delft, H. Catsburg: What makes schoolchildren read? Interne publicatie Baschwitz Instituut, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 1986.

**Why do children and teenagers read?**

The results of a study carried out in 1983/1984. 1615 schoolchildren cooperated in the project.

After discussing their theory, which distinguishes between primary and secondary forms of reading satisfaction, the authors give empirical proof of the most important reading motivation: the pupil reads in order to maintain or restore his or her mental equilibrium. Such spontaneous reading is often characterised by derogatory descriptions such as 'escape' or 'flight from reality'. We consider this type of behaviour to be healthy. We believe that we have demonstrated that the reader, whether child or adolescent, who reads in order to take a hold of his or her own emotions, is taking advantage of a pleasant means of restoring internal equilibrium when prey to unavoidable frustrations.

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**Saskia B. Tellegen-van Delft - Jan de Zanger.**

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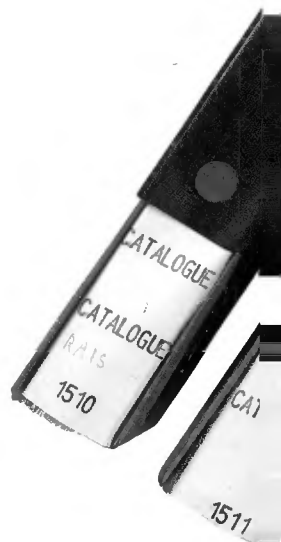
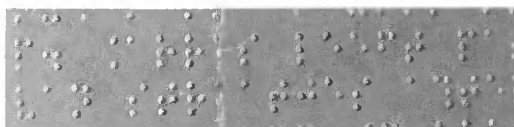
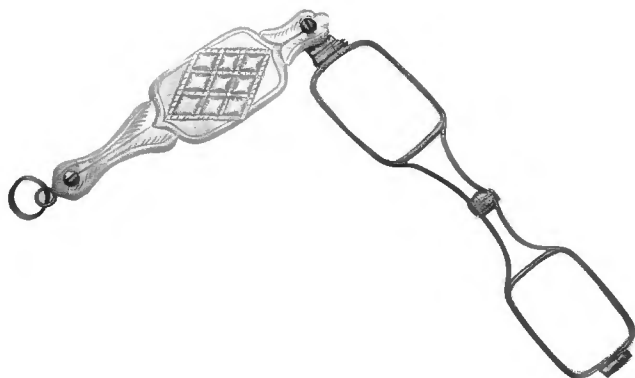
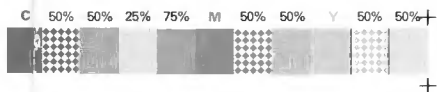
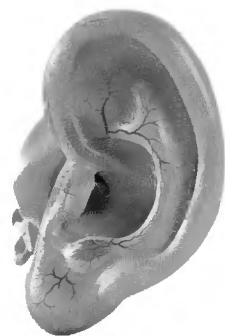
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