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Joseph Zimmer
Grand Valley State University

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FOUR PERSPECTIVES ON READING IN THE UNITED STATES: AN HISTORICAL REVIEW OF POPULAR MAGAZINES

Joseph Zimmer

When the phrase "literacy in the United States" is used, readers frequently anticipate a description of how poorly American students read and write. We have become accustomed to negative reports about schools on television, in newspapers and in popular magazines. We are persuaded that up to half of our children never learn to read, that they do not read classic literature, and that they are not taught to read in any systematic or "scientific" ways. These are serious allegations made against an educational system that has fostered universal literacy in the United States for the past 150 years.

As a graduate student I would read these reports and shout at the magazine or newspaper: "That's not true! There can't be 46 million illiterate people in the United States unless you count babies and dead people!" My anger was shared by many of my colleagues and mentors. After a brief search, I found that no one had ever seriously studied the comments made by non-experts about reading and reading education in the United States. This was virgin research territory in the field, and I managed to convince my dissertation committee that if we knew the history of comments made about reading in the media we could better formulate responses and defend the field from attacks.

I ended up confining my research to popular magazines because they were the best indexed and the most available sources over an extended period of time. I hand searched every issue of the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* from 1890 to 1990 and identified nearly 1,500 articles in popular magazines that dealt directly with reading and reading education. Once the citations were typed into a database, I photocopied, read and took significant quotes from the articles. At first, the collection of articles looked like an impossible 1,500 piece puzzle, but over the next two years and after extensive reading of social and educational history in the United States, I began to see a pattern emerge. In *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958* (1986/1995), Herbert Kleibard argued that school curricula in the United States were guided by four major interest groups: humanists, social reconstructionists, developmentalists, and scientific managers. My review of popular magazines revealed the influence these groups had on perceptions about reading, and I based my framework for sorting the articles on those groups.

Because Kleibard's scheme was not a perfect fit for data on reading, I renamed and adapted some of the categories, as follows: the intelligentsia, the meliorists, the developmentalists, and the empiricists. Nearly every article collected for the study fit cleanly into one of these four interest groups, and I became convinced that they

exerted, and continue to exert, a great deal of force in controlling the ways non-experts have perceived reading in the United States.

Articles by the "intelligentsia" were the most prevalent between 1890 and 1940. These writers were usually well-educated, sometimes famous in fields outside of reading education, and often wrote for "high-brow" or elite magazines. They had an unswerving dedication to traditional Western literature and thought that a liberal education could not be achieved without reading classic books. They believed that the family, not the school, should be the center of a person's early literary life, that family unity was enhanced by family reading, and that morality was learned through reading what they perceived to be quality books. New technologies, such as automobiles, radio and television, served only to take people away from books.

The home was the natural place to learn to read, and the role of parents was not only to teach reading but also to instill a taste for great literature in their children. In the September, 1912 issue of *Home Progress*, Edward Bok, then editor of *Ladies' Home Journal*, described how family reading strengthened family ties:

Effective parenting is always that which works in unity: where the one supplements the work of the other. The mother may spin the cords that weave the child's mental and moral training: it is the father's place to tighten the cords.

It is here that so much can be done through unified family reading,—the gradual decline of which has done more, I believe, to loosen the cords of American family life than any other cause that can be concretely found. A family that delights to gather around the evening lamp while one of its members reads aloud can generally be trusted later to make some impression on the world. A common interest is more surely quickened into life through the interest and discussion of a good healthy book or a clean-cut article on a live topic than through any other channel.

The intelligentsia were also very much concerned about the ever-expanding reading choices of children. As children gained a measure of financial independence from their parents and reading materials such as "dime novels" and "penny dreadfuls" became more available, the intelligentsia urged parents to shield their children from this "trashy" reading. They believed very sincerely in John Locke's conception of a child as *tabula rasa*, blank slate, upon which all experiences make an impression. Julia Brown illustrated *tabula rasa* in the June, 1913 issue of *Home Progress*:

The omnivorous appetite of youth must be guided by wisdom and discretion. It is the start, in everything, which shapes the finish. Give the eager little mind real mental food to nourish it lest it be fain to feed on husks. Establish a taste for good literature, and presently the child will refuse all other.

In the November, 1909 issue of *St. Nicholas*, a children's magazine, Hildegard Hawthorne used a metaphor to explain *tabula rasa* to children:

The things you put in your mind are like stones which you might set in a coronet. You may put into the coronet precious and beautiful stones of many colors arranged in an exquisite pattern. Or you may stick in dull and common pebbles without plan or harmony. One doesn't take very much more time and trouble than the other. But think how different the two crowns will be when the work is over and they are finished! Moreover, there is all the delight of finding the rare jewels, each so shining in itself.

The intelligentsia often viewed new technology as a threat to American literary traditions. In their view, inventions such as the phonograph, automobile, motion picture, and radio served primarily to draw people away from reading. Sinclair Lewis stated the following in an address at the Annual Dinner of the American Booksellers' Association in New York on May 11, 1936, which was transcribed in the May 16, 1936 issue of the *Saturday Review of Literature*:

It is obvious that people listen to the radio and go to the motion pictures instead of reading books. But there are plenty of other Cossacks on our trail: the automobile, which takes millions away from home and the bookshelf on bland evenings; the incredible vogue of bridge; the increasing number of night clubs in cities and roadhouses in the country; the new fashion of winter cruises on which the victims we so cannily stalked take what we fondly viewed as their book money and go off to Bermuda or Trinidad.

The intelligentsia also felt that reading education in the public schools was inadequate. From their perspective, schools may have been providing children with the basic tools of literacy, but were doing a poor job of teaching them reading taste. Many of them thought the reading primers to be foreign and repugnant, and others viewed the public schools as a threat to the sustenance of literary traditions in the United States. As C. D. Warner stated in the June, 1890 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*,

The mind of the ordinary child should not be judged by the mind that produces stuff of this sort: "Little Jimmy had a little white pig." "Did the little pig know Jimmy?" "Yes, the little pig knew Jimmy, and would come when he called." "How did little Jimmy know his pig from the other little pigs?" "By the twist in his tail." . . . If we examine reading-books from the lowest grade to the highest, we shall find that their object is to teach words, not literature. The lower-grade books are commonly inane (I will not say childish, for that is libel on the open minds of children) beyond description.

The second group of critics, the meliorists, believed deeply that American society would be greatly improved by universal literacy. While others did not deny this, the focus of meliorists was often misdirected. For example, literacy studies conducted with prison populations almost always show low literacy levels among inmates.

Meliorist writers often jumped to the conclusion that if those inmates had been literate, they probably would not have turned to a life of crime. The meliorists' focus was always on the statistics of literacy. They were more concerned with how many people in the United States could read than with how Americans learned to read or what they were reading. The most common contemporary meliorist articles argued that American workers did not have the functional literacy skills necessary to compete for jobs, that standardized test scores revealed that high school students had lower levels of literacy than their predecessors, and that the United States was one of the least literate of all industrialized nations.

Both the meliorists and the intelligentsia agreed that reading was valuable, but meliorists did not adopt the intelligentsia's view of the role of literary traditions in the establishment of universal literacy. The meliorist perspective was more resilient than the intelligentsia's, because the meliorists' agenda continually adapted to the needs of the times. For example, at the turn of the century, meliorists were concerned about basic literacy, the numbers of Americans who could read at all. By mid-century, when the goal of universal basic literacy had nearly been achieved, the meliorists shifted their focus toward a new goal, universal "functional literacy," a vague term used to represent levels of literacy sufficient for every American to participate in society in a free and productive way. The following articles outline a chronology of the meliorists' rise from 1890 to 1990.

Between 1890 and the decline in the wave of immigration in the 1920s, illiteracy in the United States was dominated by two groups: immigrants and rural dwellers. Illiteracy among immigrants was shown to be a temporary form: meliorists used the data from the decennial censuses to demonstrate that while illiteracy in the immigrants themselves was high, the children of illiterate immigrants were among the most literate members of society in the early twentieth century. Rural illiteracy, on the other hand, seemed to be so deeply rooted in culture and family life that it tended to pass from generation to generation. According to "Illiteracy and the Rural School" in the April 19, 1913 issue of *Survey*,

As a nation the number of illiterates among us decreased from 10.7 per cent of the population in 1900 to 7.7 per cent in 1910. In spite of this decrease, a bulletin by A. C. Monahan of the Bureau of Education refers to the "relatively high rate of illiteracy" in the country and says that this rate is due not to immigration but to lack of opportunities in the rural districts. The percentage of rural illiteracy is twice that of urban, although approximately three-fourths of the immigrants are in cities. Still more significant is a comparison between children born in this country of foreign parents with those born of native parents. Illiteracy among the latter is more than three times as great as that among the former, 'largely,' says Mr. Monahan, 'on account of the lack of opportunities for education in rural America.'

Early in the twentieth century, many meliorists believed that the pervasive illiteracy in the United States would threaten democratic processes. Winthrop Talbot,

an expert on the assimilation of immigrants, pointed to the danger in the December, 1915 issue of *North American Review*:

How many of us who enjoy the printed page realize that five million adult American citizens are wholly unable to read and write; that millions more read only simple words; and that still other millions, able to read hesitatingly, rarely do read? A large percentage of American adults are illiterates or near-illiterates, almost wholly isolated from the world of ideas and progress Such illiteracy is a barrier to democracy. . . . Illiteracy means increasing industrial agitation and unrest; it promotes race prejudice and class hatred; it precludes that mutual understanding and ability to co-operate which must underlie well-managed industry and efficient democracy; . . .

Meliorist writers used correlations between illiteracy and certain social ills to convince the American people that illiteracy was a major contributing cause of the propagation of such societal blights as crime, disease, and social isolation; and they stood by their statements about the damaging effects of illiteracy on democracy. A good example of this 1920s meliorist reasoning is "Illiteracy and the Scrap Heap," an article by Fred B. Hodgins in the May 14, 1921 issue of *Survey*. Hodgins used the irony in the story of "Bull" Cassidy—a murderer who learned to write his name for the first time on death row at Osining Prison—to advocate better enforcement of compulsory school laws:

The death-house was the only schoolhouse Bull ever attended. His schooling there was compulsory, and society saw to it that this educational provision of the criminal law was strictly enforced until Bull was graduated to the electric chair! Had the equally compulsory provision of the school law been vigorously enforced years before, there might have been a different story to tell about Bull.

The story of Bull Cassidy implied that illiterates became criminals and that improved literacy would prevent crime.

In the February 10, 1923 issue of *Literary Digest*, "Ignorance and Illness" tried to show in a similar way that illiteracy was a major contributing factor to many diseases and even early death:

Pearl and Ilsley of the Johns Hopkins University School of Hygiene and Public Health have attempted to evaluate statistically the possible correlation of mortality in American cities and illiteracy, which must inevitably contribute to detrimental ignorance. Their study indicates that the percentage of illiteracy in an urban community in this country is a significant factor in influencing unfavorably the death-rate of the community from all causes, and under certain particular causes, notably diarrhea and enteritis, pneumonia, diphtheria and measles. The typhoid fever, whooping-cough and puerperal fever death-

rates are apparently not significantly correlated with the percentage of illiteracy, for probably quite different reasons in the different cases. . . . If the ignorance which illiteracy postulates can seriously affect the equipment of our population for 'meeting the battle of existence,' the tentative conclusions just reviewed present a strong argument in favor of certain types of elementary education as a public health measure.

Pearl and Hsley's study, like the story of Bull Cassidy, was used to propagate the belief that illiteracy caused crime, disease, and poverty, when there was merely a correlation.

Once the vast majority of Americans attained basic literacy, meliorists shifted their attention to improving "functional literacy," the level of literacy skills necessary for success in society. Through the years, minimum levels of functional literacy moved from fourth grade just before World War II to twelfth grade in the late 1980s. The concept of functional literacy took shape in the Civilian Conservation Corps, a New Deal program designed to put unemployed workers to work in conservation projects in the mid-1930s. By placing workers in positions fitting their education and experience, CCC administrators identified a group of people (between 2 and 6 percent) that was completely illiterate. Another group was literate by the Census Bureau standards, yet didn't have the literacy skills necessary to complete certain minimally literate tasks. "CCC Illiterates" in the January 1936 issue of *Survey* described this group:

Nearly 80 percent of the illiterates were under twenty-five years of age, nearly all were American born, and five-sixths were from rural areas and small towns.

Functional literacy problems, especially among native Caucasians, were also detected by the military as it prepared soldiers for World War II. "Ignorance," in the June 8, 1942 issue of *Time*, showed the concern for the negative impact of functionally illiterate soldiers on national security.

The President, the U. S. Office of Education and Paul McNutt's War Manpower Commission were deeply concerned last week because a quarter of a million men, physically fit, had been rejected for illiteracy, lack of education, low mentality. Draft boards had turned up 177,000 more who did not know whether a boat would float in water, but who were not physically fit, either. [The] largest group of ignoramuses were neither aliens nor Negroes, but native whites.

After the war, economic and political shifts in the United States caused a greater focus on functional literacy as an international economic weapon. As jobs moved from blue collar to white collar, meliorist writers began a long campaign to push schools to improve functional literacy training for workers. This campaign peaked in

the 1980s, when increased economic competition, particularly with Japan and West Germany, caused meliorists to declare a functional literacy crisis in the United States. "How Business Is Joining the Fight Against Functional Illiteracy," in the April 16, 1984 issue of *Business Week*, described the growing problem of functional illiteracy in the nation's work places:

Basic social forces help to perpetuate the problem. 'Many people are part of a culture where reading things is not the primary way of getting information,' says Linda E. Stoker, training manager at Polaroid. These people produce children who do not read because reading is irrelevant to their out-of-school lives.

A major source of statistics used by the meliorists in their campaign against schools was a collection of standardized test scores, particularly declines in the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). "A Story So Short, Even Kids Who Take the SATs Can Read It," in the September 10, 1990 issue of *Newsweek*, discussed the decline in scores:

What's wrong with this sentence: 'U.S. students read pretty good'? First, of course, it contains bad grammar. Unfortunately, it's also untrue. Johnny's and Jane's reading ability has dropped for the fourth year in a row, according to the average scores of kids taking SAT college-placement exams during the 1989-90 school year. . . .

Educators offer a variety of reasons for the decline in reading skills: unchallenging curricula and textbooks, too much time spent watching TV and playing video games. Said Donald M. Stewart, president of the College Board, which administers the SATs, 'Reading is in danger of becoming a lost art.'

The third group, the developmentalists, used the relatively new sciences of developmental and educational psychology to advise the American public on reading issues. The developmentalists had many disagreements and debates with the intelligentsia about how a child should be taught to read. The two main topics of debate were children's choice in reading and the time to begin reading instruction with a child.

Whereas the intelligentsia believed in presenting children with only the best in literature from the earliest ages, developmentalists believed that children should be allowed to choose their reading materials freely. This choice would allow children to discover and fulfill their own unique psychological and developmental needs naturally. For example, during the 1950s, the intelligentsia were concerned about the proliferation and mass consumption of comic books. They believed that those materials were harmful to the future reading habits of children. On the contrary, developmentalists believed that comic books were the perfect reading materials for children because they allowed children to explore their feelings and fantasize about their later lives. In the March 1976 issue of *Esquire*, Stephen Gosnell took the developmental perspective to describe the reading tastes of children:

. . . if you are stuffing *kinder*-lit down the throats of your progeny hoping to inculcate incipient culture, you might want to examine your motives and reassess your methods. What is reading supposed to do for kids? What are the real priorities? . . .

Kids . . . are not interested in ideas. They like puns, cruel jokes, amazing statistics, monsters, the subversion of authority, brute strength, complicated pictures, and perverse nonsense. In short, anything, no matter how veiled in metaphor, that suggests to them that they are getting a no-bullshit glimpse of the silly but dangerous universe that adults inhabit and that they will have to, bit by bit, adapt themselves to.

The intelligentsia and developmentalists also disagreed about when a child should learn to read. The intelligentsia believed that parents should begin their children on the path to reading from very young ages. Developmentalists at first admonished parents for teaching children to read in the preschool years, but then backed away from this stance when research in the 1950s and 1960s revealed that many preschool children are developmentally ready and able to learn to read. Calvin T. Ryan, an education professor, argued, in the October 1946 issue of *Better Homes & Gardens*, that parents should not teach their preschool children to read :

'Dickie could read long before he started to school!' Mrs. B. boasts at her bridge club.

But Mrs. B. is a foolish mother. She has satisfied her pride at the expense of Dickie's precious eyes and nervous system.

Learning to read demands mental-visual co-ordination that taxes every nerve in a small body. The very muscles used are seldom developed before a child is 6 and one-half or 7 years old—sometimes older.

Studies show that the percent of nearsighted children is much higher among early readers. Truly, 'The alphabet is as injurious to the child's eye as an unwise diet is to his stomach.' . . .

Educators agree that there are many things Dickie must learn before he starts to read. In fact, until he learns some of these his ability to read is practically worthless to him.

Mrs. M. condemned Nan's teacher because 'Nan has been in school nearly a year and hasn't learned to read!'

Actually, Nan was learning to read—learning the right and safe way. Her teacher, considering Nan's own good, was developing her speech, teaching her new words, and helping her put them together in sentences. She was introducing Nan to interesting picture-story books to whet her appetite, reading her stories, and encouraging her to tell them.

By the 1980s, the developmentalists were concentrating more on providing children with appropriate preschool experiences than with establishing any well-defined limits for the acquisition of reading.

The fourth group, the empiricists, placed their trust in scientific or experimental methods to solve reading problems in the United States. Most of their articles focused on developments in three areas of reading: reading difficulties, methods of teaching reading, and speed reading. The chief problem with these articles is that developments in a field like reading education come from many different sources—e.g., medicine, education, psychology—and are often presented in magazines in a fragmented way. There were many articles on *the* cause of reading difficulties and *the* way to teach reading, but very few that explored these subjects in a multidimensional way. This was often confusing for non-experts, because information presented in popular magazines on these topics was often self-contradictory.

Early in the century, empiricists referred to reading difficulties as forms of “congenital word blindness,” an incurable condition believed to be passed genetically. People suffering from this affliction were most often not kept in school, but, instead, forced to fend for themselves without literacy skills. By the 1920s, research began to show that children with reading difficulties could be helped through remediation and other therapies.

From the very beginning, reading difficulties were thought to be caused by a malfunction of the brain. Articles such as “Ruth, Who Couldn’t Read,” in the November 15, 1927 issue of *Survey*, tended to propagate such an idea:

After examining Ruth, several of the doctors at the clinic felt that her difficulty was due to ‘some actual break in the cortical association tracts.’ But Dr. Wolfe [a medical doctor who applied methods of psychotherapy to children with reading problems] saw in the child’s situation a definite behavior problem, and he took the case, hoping that a psycho-therapeutic approach might lead to a solution of a problem which was hopeless if regarded from an organic viewpoint.

‘My training under Dr. Adler had taught me that alexia (inability to read) and left-handedness often go together,’ Dr. Wolfe said of reading failure.

The idea that left-handedness and reading difficulties go together has since become a myth in reading education, but many non-experts still believe that the connection exists. Later research demonstrated that reading difficulties were not all brain problems, but could be caused by emotional, psychological, and/or social problems. The fragmented nature of the reports in magazines thwarted the efforts of reading specialists to explain reading difficulties as complex phenomena caused by a large number of factors and combinations of factors related to children’s development, both physical and cognitive. In other words, articles usually presented reading difficulties as having one cause and one cure when in reality, they almost always have complex causes and no clear “cure.”

The most disruptive incident in the area of methods of teaching reading was the publication in 1955 of Rudolf Flesch’s *Why Johnny Can’t Read, and What You Can Do About It*. This book attacked the empirical ways that reading was taught in school and sparked the continuing debate over whether reading should be taught visually,

through whole words, or aurally, through phonics. Flesch believed that all reading should be taught through phonics and that schools were perpetuating visual methods which, in his opinion, were failures. During the next thirty-five years, dozens of articles appeared touting the benefits of one or the other system of teaching reading. John Gordon illustrated the inflammatory nature of the attacks on reading education in the November, 1956 issue of *American Mercury*:

To put it in 'short, jerky' language, it means *Teaching School vs. Babysitting*. It is as simple as this: teaching reading with phonics demands real effort on the part of teacher and pupil; trying to teach reading by the word method licenses a classroom for fun and frolic, because any normal child can memorize two or three hundred words in a school year—even without a teacher.

The debate over the best way to teach reading continues in popular magazines. The view of most experts in the field is that there is no one best way to teach reading. Individual methods work with individual children, and no one method can help all children.

As the numbers of publications in the United States mushroomed during the twentieth century, many empiricists touted the benefits of speed reading, an advanced skimming technique that allowed readers to reach reading rates of several hundred to thousands of words per minute. From the 1930s to the 1970s, popular magazines followed this craze. Speed reading eventually collapsed for two reasons: many of the claims of reading rates of thousands of words per minute were found to be false or short-lived; and Americans drastically specialized in their reading habits in the second half of the twentieth century in order to keep up with growing numbers of books and magazines. Ruth McCoy Harris explained the tenets of speed reading in the November, 1945 issue of *Reader's Digest*:

'Slow readers are poor readers,' says Norman Lewis, author of *How to Read Better and Faster*. 'A person reads fast because he thinks fast, has good eyesight, a good vocabulary, and a wide background of information. Most persons who read ten times as fast as the plodder absorb much more of what they read than he does.' . . .

The wider your eye span, the more words you see at once and the faster you read. A good reader makes only two or three stops on an ordinary line of print; a poor reader stops for nearly every word. An excellent reader will see an entire line at once, so that he can read *down* a narrow column of type without moving his eyes from left to right. That is how Theodore Roosevelt got the reputation of reading a whole page at a glance—an obvious impossibility. He read rapidly down the page, and he knew how to skim, often reading only the key words.

The idea that readers could expand their eye-spans so dramatically was later refuted by optical and reading research.

The next time you pick up an article about reading education, try to think of it in terms of the history I have presented here. Was the article written by a member of the intelligentsia? A meliorist? A developmentalist? An empiricist? Rather than taking the message at face value, try to determine the social or political agenda behind the article. This will help you to place the article within the context of popular perceptions of reading.

All four of these interest groups are still around, and each continues to serve a purpose in shaping popular perceptions of reading. The intelligentsia has receded, but had a brief resurgence in the "cultural literacy" crisis of the late 1980s. The "cultural conscience" provided by the intelligentsia helps remind Americans of literary traditions in an era so dominated by popular culture.

Meliorists have picked up their pace since the 1960s and will continue to bash schools and warp statistics to show that the United States is doing poorly in the area of literacy. Their criticism has actually become a crucial part of the educational establishment. Criticism raises consciousness, and consciousness raises money and other resources to help solve problems. One may even argue that little progress would be made and little funding would be available for a school system that has reached all of its goals.

Developmentalists have presented a consistent flow of information to parents and others concerned with the literacy development of children. In most cases, the information is accurate and has done a great deal to raise consciousness about the importance of reading, not only in preschool years, but throughout a person's life.

Empiricists will continue to present information about advances in reading difficulties, methods of teaching reading, and speed reading. We should keep in mind that it is not the nature of popular magazines to present more than a fragmentary view of these very complex issues. It would be wise to assume, at this point, that "solutions" to these problems presented in popular magazines are dubious at best.

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