

The Right to Read

by DAVID DEMPSEY

“Millions of Americans read so poorly that they can barely read at all.” This statement by the National Reading Council—set up last year by President Nixon—underscores one of the country’s greatest social problems. An estimated three million adults are totally illiterate. Another twenty-five million job holders have “reading deficiencies . . . serious enough to deny them advancement.” Five million young people are unable to read well enough to qualify for most types of employment. Eight million school children suffer from reading disorders requiring special remedies. The council speaks of a “reading disease” of epidemic proportions, an opinion buttressed by one authority, Dr. Samuel Sava, who argues “that a figure of 25 per cent for functional illiteracy for the male population at large would not be far off the mark.”

The startling thing about these fig-

ures is that not only do more Americans go to school than ever before but on the average they stay in school longer. Paradoxically, as the educational level of the country has risen, so has the rate of functional illiteracy. For this, one logically blames the schools; yet, the problem is not so simple. As American industry makes increasingly sophisticated demands upon even its lowest paid workers, standards of “literacy” rise, too. Today, only about 15 per cent of the jobs in the United States are “unskilled” (compared to 30 per cent in 1945). By the end of the decade, it is predicted that this figure will drop to 5 per cent. Under these conditions, literacy takes on a new meaning, and this year’s slogan for National Library Week—“You’ve got a right to read”—assumes a special urgency. The right to be able to read is, today, a condition of economic, to say nothing of cultural, survival.

When the National Reading Council was organized, under the chairman-

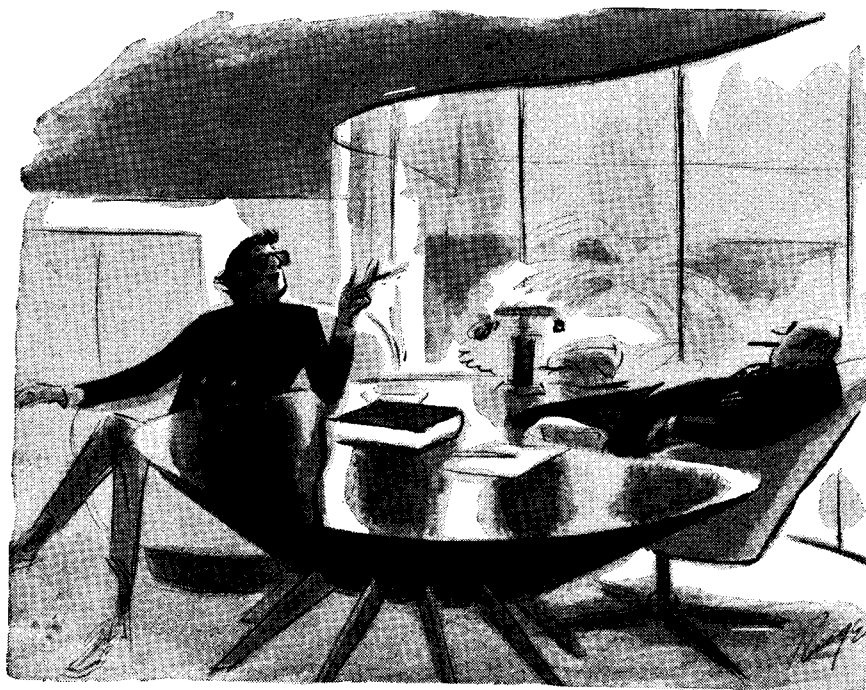
ship of AT&T Vice President Walter W. Straley, no single government body had ever attempted to coordinate an attack on the “reading disease” in the sense that the National Institute of Health researches and seeks cures for physical ailments. One of the council’s first acts was to commission Louis Harris & Associates to measure the “survival” literacy rate in the United States—that is, the percentage of Americans lacking the practical reading skills necessary to “survive” in this country.

The test used in the survey was the ability of the respondent to fill out application forms such as those used for Social Security, public assistance, Medicaid, and a driver’s license. The findings were not too surprising. Functional illiteracy is highest for big-city dwellers and for rural inhabitants, with the latter group slightly worse off than the former in the ranges measured. Fewer people who live in small towns and cities had difficulty reading the forms. Suburban residents showed up best. Geographically, the South had the highest range of illiteracy, and people in the West showed the fewest reading problems.

Practical literacy decreases in direct proportion to income. Five per cent of those who earn less than \$5,000 a year missed more than 30 per cent of the answers, but only 1 per cent of those with an income of \$15,000 or higher did that poorly. Illiteracy among white respondents is about half that of blacks. Even among members of the low-income group, the range for non-whites is much higher than that for whites. The youngest age group proved to be the most literate; the oldest (fifty and over) the most deficient. Between the sexes, women surpass men slightly in reading ability, although no one is quite sure why.

Until a few years ago, it was widely assumed that the reading difficulties of many children were caused by dyslexia, a disorder supposedly the result of MBD (minimal brain damage); but this theory could hardly explain why dyslexia should be more prevalent among poor children than among their more fortunate peers. Recently, a committee of medical and reading experts appointed by the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare concluded that MBD is a small factor in the total problem, and that not more than 2 to 5 per cent of the school-age population suffers from physiological disorders that make learning how to read difficult.

The explanation, rather, lies in the cultural disorder underlying the family background of the student, the poor nutrition (a child may lack the energy level to concentrate, although he may be inherently bright), the absence of



“ . . . Then—for the big boffo finale—with three hundred girls singing the ‘Ode to Joy’ from his Ninth Symphony, we could have Beethoven regain his hearing.”

physical and social amenities. Studies indicate that the best readers come from homes that have lots of appliances and lots of rooms, but not necessarily lots of books.

From this the logical, but erroneous, conclusion might be drawn that if we should simply fill up the homes of non-readers with dish washers and turn on the hot water, the children would necessarily be turned on to print. This might help, but it would not solve the problem. Middle-class culture is as much a symptom of achievement as a reason for it. One appliance, however, that is specifically useful is television. Today, the right to read implies the right to watch TV. As Dr. Sava points out, television stimulates reading and "supplies conceptual background or comprehension and extends interests." But this gives rise to paradox. Although television may improve reading skills, it conditions the child to an electronic mode of communication so that the immediate benefit to books may prove to be a long-term loss.

Moreover, as the poverty child grows older, his limited access to books may choke off an interest in reading. Ghetto libraries are not always geared to ghetto needs. (To the poor, a library can be just another forbidding, middle-class institution.) The very act of teaching "literacy" can discourage a desire to read. Professor Philip Ennis, of Wesleyan University, points out that "The pressure to read for practical purposes can be so heavy and . . . onerous due to the training of 'how to read a page' in school that the use of print for other motives can be endangered."

It was with this in mind that the National Book Committee, the Ford Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities combined forces to set up a Books Exposure project in Fall River, Massachusetts, three years ago. Carried out in five "culturally disadvantaged" elementary schools, this experiment in motivation emphasized reading at home as well as at school, and for pleasure rather than achievement.

Fall River proved to be a good choice; as a decaying textile city, it exhibited in microcosm most of the educational problems that attend the economic and social ills of the large metropolis. The school drop-out rate was high (33 per cent in high school, an even higher percentage in junior high) and 25 per cent of the school population was foreign-born, chiefly Portuguese. By and large, the children came from non-reading backgrounds. Previous efforts to improve their reading skills had been "costly and generally ineffective."

The research design in this project consisted of fifteen experimental and

fifteen control classrooms, at grade levels one through five. Some fifty-seven volunteers were recruited, most of them local adults. In the experimental groups, reading sessions were held once a week, during school hours. Children were allowed to take books home, and they were given four books a year, of their own choice, as gifts. They also wrote their own poems, book reports, and stories. Emphasis was on "surrounding children with stimulating adults who encourage them to read, . . . share their excitement about books, and give them books of their own to keep."

The control groups, by comparison, were supplied with books, which the students were allowed to borrow, but there were no volunteers, no reading sessions, no writing projects, and no gift books. The results, when measured against the experimental units, were dramatically lower in the development of "reading attitudes," although both groups showed improvement over previous performance. In sum, continued exposure to books created a desire to read for pleasure, and when this was reinforced by group reading, adult stimulation, and book ownership, the children for the first time tended to prefer reading to many other forms of activity, and to "become increasingly careful in their choices."

Books Exposure is now moving on for tryouts in Boston and Minneapolis. Among older children, similar success in turning non-readers into readers has been achieved in "crash programs" such as that carried out in the nearly all-black Marshall High School on Chicago's South Side. A few years ago, Principal Henry Springs set up educa-

tional (he doesn't call it remedial) reading classes for students who wanted to catch up. "We keep these reading labs open from eight o'clock in the morning until ten at night, and the students come in," Springs told a conference organized by the National Book Committee. "The students run the bookshop, and they sell the books [primarily black-oriented] as fast as we can purchase them. . . . Some of the youngsters can't read these books, but they carry them around all the time." It is not just a matter of chance that more than 50 per cent of Marshall graduates now go on to college.

The National Reading Council hopes to enlist ten million volunteer tutors by 1976 to work with children who need help. A network of training centers will be set up across the country, model tutorial programs are to be conducted in various cities, and a public relations campaign will recruit volunteers and sell the idea to local communities, with the necessary funding to come from the Office of Education and other federal agencies.

"Tutoring breaks down the unproductive teacher-class relationship and, by definition, sets up a high productive arrangement of one-to-one where concern is paramount," the council declares. In tests to date, the most effective tutors have proved to be older children. "It has been shown that such programs upgrade the reading skills of not only the pupil but the tutor as well," the council adds.

Well and good, but where do we go from here? Fortunately, public libraries are beginning to take up the challenge of the ghetto in "outreach" programs directed at non-borrowers and (in many cases) non-readers. This is sometimes done by setting up neighborhood, or storefront, centers manned by community personnel. The Brooklyn Public Library's "3 Bs" project places small collections of paperback books in bars, beauty salons, and barber shops. A few cities run free bus service for children in the district to get them into the library. The New Haven center ties in books with handicraft, art, music, and language clubs for young people. In some libraries, phonograph records provide background music for reading sessions, as well as enticement for the rock-happy young.

All of these programs have two things in common: They direct their primary efforts at poverty areas, and, hopefully, they extend the idea of literacy beyond the merely functional. Ultimately, for the millions of marginally literate in this country, reading must become its own reward. The right to read means more than knowing how to fill out a form.

Gift

by Reeve Spencer Kelley

I give you an ounce of blood
dressed as a sparrow

not necessarily
in masquerade, mind you,

though it is possible
it could have come
as a chickadee

but there it is
in a blood-proof skin
plus down and none-too-solid feather

a momentary sea
on dry land, in fatal red
and furious need of seed,
constant to the winging
of its shores

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Dossier Dictatorship

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This week SR focuses on the invasion of privacy. The lead article by Ralph Nader (page 18) discusses the use of the dossier by credit bureaus and other private organizations, while former Attorney General Ramsey Clark, in his review of Arthur R. Miller's *The Assault on Privacy* (page 29), assesses the impact of a rampant computer technology devoted to the gathering of information on private citizens. In the following editorial, editor-at-large Peter Schrag deals with the growing use of surveillance by governmental agencies.*

It does not take a long memory to recall the days when that segment of the Orwellian universe that dealt with government surveillance of private citizens and the collection of "dossiers" was largely the concern of fiction writers, students of Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany, and a small number of others who were generally regarded as paranoids. There had been reports as early as 1966 or 1967 that the police had infiltrated the peace and civil rights movements, that the FBI was tapping Martin Luther King's telephone (among others), and that anti-war demonstrators were being carefully photographed by intelligence agents, but most of those reports were dismissed as exaggerations. If they cared at all, most Americans were certain that their government had neither the resources nor the guile to go into the snooping business in any large way.

We now know that we were wrong,

that during the last generation (and most precipitously in the past three or four years) agencies of the government have created an extensive apparatus for the collection, storage, and exchange of what we once regarded as privileged information about the most intimate details of our private lives. The revelations of former intelligence agents (military and civilian) and the extended hearings last month of the Senate Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights have made it entirely clear that the paranoia of 1960 has become the fact of 1971. The Justice Department (particularly the FBI), the Internal Revenue Service, the Passport Division of the State Department, the Social Security Administration, the military, state, and local police, the welfare agencies, the motor vehicles bureaus, and other bureaucracies maintain dossiers on millions of Americans.

The information in those dossiers—many of them now computerized—is often required to carry on the legitimate and necessary functions of the agency that maintains them; but a substantial and growing part, as we learned from the hearings, is also accessible to other people and organizations, public and private, for purposes—to put it mildly—far beyond propriety or Constitutional limits. Sometimes the information leaks; sometimes it is exchanged between agencies; sometimes it is used deliberately to intimidate innocent people. Since it is now technologically possible for the government to link all its data banks through com-

puter terminals and compatible storage systems, the potential already exists for obtaining a master print-out in seconds of all the information—fact, rumor, innuendo—that has been compiled on a particular individual by a number of different agencies. So far, that capability has not been implemented; if it ever is, the government or any unscrupulous official will be able to intimidate or blackmail political enemies at will and to engage in the sort of totalitarian machinations that were once the fantasies of political science fiction.

Yet, even without a central data bank, information has been blatantly misused. Sometimes it is sold—legally or illegally—to private buyers; in some states, any salesman can buy lists of car registrants (with the type, model, and age of the car) from the motor vehicles bureau; elsewhere individual policemen have sold confidential police information to corporate employers interested in the background of prospects for executive positions; sometimes information is surreptitiously released by the police or the FBI to the press to embarrass an individual or organization. We know from the subcommittee hearings that material collected by government investigators about Mayor Joseph Alioto of San Francisco was leaked to writers of a magazine exposé; we also know that last fall military intelligence agents were engaged in the surveillance of political candidates in the state of Illinois, among them Adlai E. Stevenson III, now the state's junior Senator. At this moment there is little other than self-restraint to prevent such information from being furnished to politicians who are sympathetic to government snoops or who happen to enjoy the favor of those who employ the agents. More subtle, but equally frightening, is the general potential for intimidating any citizen engaged in unpopular causes or in whatever political activities happen to displease the government at the moment. The effect is contagious and crippling; most men who think they are being watched are likely to be more cautious in their political opinions no matter how innocent their record and behavior. They have no assurance, moreover, that their dossiers are not loaded with implications and inaccuracies; there is no way that they can see, correct, or answer the material.

On several occasions during the hearings, Senator Sam J. Ervin, Jr., the subcommittee chairman, spoke of the "chilling effect" of government surveillance; what he could not know for certain at the time was that such surveillance has been used deliberately by agents of the government to intimidate dissenters. A few days after the hearings closed, several members of