

## **"What Arabs Read: A Pan-Arab Survey on Readership" A Commentary**

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In Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, the voice of his famous character, Mr. Gradgrind, opens the novel saying: "Now, what I want is facts". After reading the survey on "What Arabs Read", I felt that it would have much appealed to that character's espousal of "facts and calculations". Dickens's irony of calculations and statistics is not invoked here to depreciate the value of the survey but rather to point out that empirically measuring such a phenomenon as reading is so difficult a task. As *The Arab Human Development Report 2003: Building a Knowledge Society* shows, the present state of the system of knowledge and its acquisition in the Arab world, especially when it comes to reading and book production, suffers from a great shortage of verified data. Even when such data is available as in the case of the UNESCO reports of 1991 and 2005 or the US working paper for the G8 summit in 2004, the results and figures are always controversial. For example, some estimations based on the above mentioned reports say that an Arab reader on average reads 6 minutes per year and that Arab countries' output of books represents just 1.1% of the world total while the Arab population represents around 5% of the world population. The state of Arab readership appears to be so poor to the extent that *The Guardian's* journalist Brian Whitaker reports (September 13, 2004) of an exhibit of a mock gravestone in Beirut Book Fair adorned with shriveled flowers and labeled "The Arab Reader".

Generally speaking, in the light of the above-mentioned reports and responses to them in various Arab media, the results and figures of Next Page's "What Arabs Read" seem to be questionably very rosy, even though they may be morale-raising for Arabs' self-esteem. My reservations on the results of the survey are not merely based on the conclusions of UN reports pertaining to the Arab world or the recent report of the World Bank (2008) on the unsatisfactory state of education in the Middle East.

It is in order here to point out that my comments arise from my personal/subjective experience as an Egyptian university professor in a college of arts that has around 16,000 students enrolled in its departments, where reading supposedly represents almost the main and most essential activity of students. I teach in the

English Department classes that amount to about 400-500 students each, with an average total number of 15000 students every semester. I teach courses on the novel, criticism, and translation for both students of English and Mass Media departments. In other words, my job gives me a first-hand experience of students' tendencies and attitudes towards reading and books. I am quite aware that they fall within the age category of 17-25 which figures prominently on most of the statistical tables of Next Page survey. Besides, my students belong to different demographic, gender and socio-economic categories, which meets in a more random, less scientific way some of the criteria of Next Page survey. My comments also arise from my personal experience for over 20 years as a reader who has been following the news of books, and their distribution, problems or scandals surrounding some of them, the best-selling, acclaimed or awarded books, as well as translated books into Arabic<sup>1</sup>.

Though the Egyptian context of reading and readers is my main concern and the background against which I read the survey, my critical remarks remain generally relevant to the nine countries covered in the survey.

Statistical surveys should be taken with a grain of salt when it deals-1 with such a complicated phenomenon as reading. For while the survey covers quantitatively the socio-economic co-ordinates of the act of reading, it overlooks the personal and subjective dimensions. In the Arab societies, which are characterized by a high percentage of illiteracy, weakness of educational attainment, and the low quality of education, and "religiousization" of all aspects of social and cultural life, respondents would mostly seek to present an image of themselves as educated readers, intellectuals (*muthaqafeen*) or pious persons who observe their religion by reading the Quran or religious books. Hence, the image of the "reader" becomes some kind of psychological compensation for socio-economic and educational inferiority as well as a means of investing the self with .divine authority based on shallow religious knowledge

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<sup>1</sup> UNDP report 2003 stresses the value of the subjective opinions of Arab intellectuals on the state of knowledge, especially faculty members: "In the case of university faculty members in particular, their views acquire more importance because of their ability to contribute to the formation of human capital through their higher education functions" p. 87.

The survey demarks its sampling universe in Phase One (p. 7) as-2 "the literate population: defined as people who have successfully completed primary education and or/grade level up to the age of 12", and defines readers in Phase Two (p. 12) as "those who have read books, magazines, or newspapers in the past 12 months". However, it does not seek to define what is meant by reading, its functions in respondents' life or in the whole system of knowledge as well as its productivity in the socio-economic system against which it is measured. Hence, the education limit set by the survey or the request to "read out loud the following paragraph/sentence" in the questionnaire (p. 330) are not sufficiently significant indicators for measuring reading qualitatively. For instance, an average of more than 90% of reader respondents in all the countries surveyed claim that their main reading is the Qur'an and religious books, which are written in a very classical Arabic that is very difficult to understand even for highly educated persons. So, what kind of ?reading are we talking about here

The percentage of readers in Egypt 88% seems unreasonably high,-3 especially in view of the high percentage of illiteracy which is estimated at around 28.6%.<sup>2</sup> The percentage becomes all the more unreasonable if we take into consideration that more than half the quota of respondents belong to social class DE (p. 8). The figure of 88% is so confusing for me because from among my 800 students of literature only 20% read the English texts required for class. Besides, around 8 students only have read one or two novels by Naguib Mahfouz. On the other hand, from among 600 mass media students only some 10% read newspapers. Also the percentage of Egyptian newspapers and magazines readers recorded by the survey at 90% bluntly contradicts the social and cultural commentators' complaint about the decline of the habit of buying and reading newspapers in Egypt. Moreover, in the section of "Profile of

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<sup>2</sup> UNDP report 2005 includes Egypt among the nine countries in the world that suffer from the highest percentage of illiteracy.

Newspapers and Magazines preferred" (p. 13), the percentage of readers of sports 30% is relatively low. My impression is that there is a much higher percentage of readers of "football" news alone. Likewise, the percentage of internet users (22%, p. 15) among Egyptian readers is relatively high<sup>3</sup>. This figure is all the more unbelievable when we learn that 62% of them (p. 3) read newspapers and magazines online. One of the interesting features is that the "taboo topics"-included in the questionnaire within the group of questions related to the reasons for the use of the internet (p. 333) – does not appear in any percentage in Egypt or any of the country surveyed. I guess this has to do with maintaining the personal image of the intellectual reader, for it is quite common, at least for age bracket 19-24, to access the internet for taboo topics. Besides, from the graph on p. 15, we can infer that almost 50% of the internet use has nothing to do with "reading". The Egyptian readers' confusion of search engines, encyclopedias and websites (p. 20) might give us an indication of the probability of false responses to the questionnaire.

Since the main trigger for readers, as concluded by the survey, is "the initial learning" attained at school, most of the reader respondents recall the authors and books they have known during their education years in school or university. This aspect casts doubts on the element of current readings and reading as a habit which the survey attempts to measure. With few exceptions, mostly in the cases of Algeria, Lebanon and Syria, respondents generally do not record contemporary authors or books. For example, the name of the Egyptian intellectual Taha Hussein (1889-1973), whose books were usually incorporated into education curricula, appears on the statistical tables of Tunisia and Morocco among the favorite authors while it does not appear on the tables of Egypt. Moreover, the prevalent tendency of respondents to reading religious material

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<sup>3</sup> See UNDP report 2003, pp. 47-64 on the low number of computer owners and the high cost of internet service in Arab countries.

contradicts with mentioning Hussein among their favorites, for he was a liberal thinker whose Islamic faith has been usually questioned by the traditional Islamic establishment. On the other hand, the Noble Prize winner Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006) does not appear on the table recording the current readings of Egyptian respondents (p. 34). Ridiculously enough, Oxford dictionary and Al-Sihah Arabic dictionaries appear among the readers' favourite books

Concerning location issues, my view is that school and university-6 books are not a significant indicator for the habit of reading at least in Egypt. With few exceptions such as reference books or dictionaries, especially in scientific disciplines, school or university textbooks are disposables at the end of the semester or the year. And rarely do students depend on them; they have recourse to notes, glosses and summaries. Moreover, in the light of the severe shortage of public libraries and their holdings, as well as the poor state of school and university libraries, the number of books kept at home is supposed to be larger with the increase in age brackets. The table on p. 28 shows that 24% of the age bracket 45-65 keep 26-50 books at home, which contradicts the rule of accumulation with years if reading is a constant habit

My final remark has to do with "Readers' Attitude". This section is-7 significant as regards the contradictions as well as the social and psychological complications surrounding the act of reading as a habit. For example, that 52% of Egyptian readers of books agreed that a book is a nice present to family and friends is a questionable figure. For how could we account for the considerable increase of gift and bric-a-brac shops that abound in Chinese goods-a phenomenon so noticeable in the Egyptian street and synchronous with the decrease in bookshops and the disappearance of many old-book stands? Moreover, the fairly high percentage of respondents to

some statements on p. 64 suggests that reading is a difficult task and  
:sometimes done reluctantly. For example

Reading Arabic is too different from speaking Arabic" (the implications of  
this statement is ambiguous); Reading a book, watching TV, listening to the  
radio or surfing the Internet is the same. It's all about I read because I am  
not allowed to go out in the evening"; or "Reading is a hard work because  
."you need to concentrate

## **:Recommendations**

There need to be a definition of what is meant be-1  
reading in terms of concept, method, and functions  
.within the larger framework of knowledge

By the same token, the definition of the reader-2  
should be more elaborated and nuanced. The extent  
of educational attainment or linguistic competence,  
and socio-economic class are not enough criteria.

The quality of education often counts more than the  
quantity or degree of education. Hence, private  
education and public education will most probably  
produce different kinds of readers. In addition,  
higher socio-economic classes can provide lifestyle  
that produce less or different readers while lower  
class may be a motive for gaining more cultural  
.capital by way of compensation

In addition to the objective parameters that the-3  
survey sets for itself, personal and subjective aspects  
of reading should be incorporated into the  
questionnaire or separate complementary tests and  
questionnaires can be specifically devised for this  
.purpose

It would be very useful to complement the responses-4  
of the readers, or the "so-called readers", with the  
views of the people working in and contributing to  
the sphere of reading and knowledge such as  
academics, pedagogists, journalists, intellectuals,  
.publishers...etc

Results of future similar surveys should be compared-5  
and verified against the various types of data related  
to reading such as the level and quality of education,  
book industry, book translations, distribution and

sales of newspapers and magazines, libraries' collections and books' circulation, numbers of internet visitors of e-libraries, encyclopedias, online journals, and especially blogs as they accrue an increasing number of Arab readers because of the .freedom of censorship they allow

New, creative and untraditional methods of tracing-6 the circulation of books should be devised in light of the shortage of recorded data about books in the Arab world. Such areas as old books' trade and sales, uncopyrighted books and pirate translations should be taken into consideration in light of the low economics of most of the Arab countries with large population and the retreat of book industry and .market

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