What Arabs Read: A Pan-Arab Survey on Readership

Commentary Submitted
by

James M. Wile, Ph.D.
Director of International Development
International Reading Association (USA)

What Arabs Read

Background

A literate society is essential for economic development and social integration. The practice of reading and writing enables a culture to identify its past while it envisions its future. The information age places a premium on the generation and dissemination of knowledge and information. And the ability to use texts in all its diverse formats is essential. Local customs, local wisdom and oral traditions must remain valued, of course. But, individuals and communities that do not value and practice high levels of reading and writing on a wide scale are inevitably at risk of becoming the victims rather than the masters of the global knowledge society. It is in this sense that it is important to raise questions about who reads and who does not. New platforms and new literacies as well as an ever-expanding knowledge base make it imperative that policymakers and information purveyors find solid answers to these questions. Moreover, they must use research data to shape informed and effective policies to expand readership to ensure that all human capital in their communities is developed to the highest potential.

For most people, neither the ability to read nor the reading habit is instinctive or intuitive. These are instead acquired habits and learned behaviors. Much of the general public, educators, and policymakers presume that creating literate individuals, literate families, literate communities, and thus a literate society is a responsibility that falls to schooling. Teachers are typically expected to instill in their pupils not only the *ability* to read but, more importantly, to model and inspire the *habit* of reading, with the end goal of creating a powerful motivation become lifelong readers.

Habits of literacy, like other higher order cognitive functions, develop over time and are sustained by cultural currency. There are a great many ideas and skills which are learned in school that are quickly forgotten immediately after graduation. Generally it is those skills which the individual perceives as having little or no relevance or practical value that fall into disuse. Reading is certainly a high value activity in schools in every country. But outside of the boundaries of formal education, countries differ markedly in the value placed on reading and writing. Learning how to read may be a school function. But the development of a culture in which reading and writing are embedded in the natural and commonplace discourse of daily life is a task that goes well beyond the schoolhouse. In all likelihood, to the extent that reading and writing are perceived merely as school activities it is all the more unlikely they will have very much application or function in the real world.

Education research has contributed a great deal of information about how to teach reading. But we know considerably less about what makes a person a reader. We have some insights about how to introduce the reading habit, but less is know about the factors that sustain the reading habit. How do factors such as family values, culture, social class, access to texts, and government policies shape popular and individual values when it comes to reading and writing? We have much less data on *why* people read and the place of reading in the out-of-school context. What makes one person a reader? What turns another into a non-reader? These questions are at the heart of the present study

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commissioned by *NextPage*.

Why This Topic Matters
The first test of any serious study is that it matters. That is, the study must be an exploration of a phenomenon that is significant and has widespread implications. The questions that generated this study are indeed significant. And not just for parents who want their children to succeed in school. These are important issues for the adult illiterate whom we ask to join the community of readers and writers. The questions are significant for the employer interested in raising worker productivity, and to the bookseller and to the publishers of books, newspapers, and magazines. With nearly 800 million illiterates worldwide, the question, "what makes a reader?" is one of the fundamental issues confronting societies today.

But of even greater concern are the *alliterates*—people who know how to read but for a variety of reasons choose not to. The number of alliterates can only be imagined, but popular estimates are not particularly encouraging. The reading habit is an essential ingredient for creating a national identity, for democratizing the world of ideas and experience. So it is not an academic exercise to ask, "What makes a reader?" it is a life-changing, world changing question.

NextPage, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to promoting global literacy by increasing access to texts, commissioned a study of reading habits among individuals in nine countries in the Arab world to explore this fundamental question. That the study was commissioned for an exploration of the reading habits of Arabs in North Africa and the Middle East is intriguing. The context of the study adds an interesting dimension to the research question. For this study inquires specifically: what makes *Arabs* readers and writers? What are the components of the Arab culture (economic, political, religious, family, and so forth) that creates readers and writers? And what sorts of readers and writers are they? Conversely, what are the components of the Arab culture that prove to be barriers for readers?

One cannot help but wonder how the attitudes and habits of Arab readers compare with other readers. Although the authors of this study do not pursue this cultural comparative analysis, I suspect individuals who read this study may entertain this question, perhaps reflecting on their own attitudes and habits as well as their assumptions about their own cultures as they review the data. This sense of reflection and inherent comparison is a testament, I believe, to the centrality and the universality of the topic NextPage has selected as the focus of this study. That is to say, the study may have been undertaken to explore the attitudes and habits of one geo-cultural bloc, but it is a question that confronts all cultures.

The Commentary
The authors present a complex study and a wealth of data in this valuable and important work. They are to be commended for the breadth of their curiosity, the rigor with which they went about developing and implementing this study, and the apparent fairness with

which they depict the data. They have displayed an array of information that should provide a very valuable baseline service to scholars, policymakers, and commercial interests. This discussion is intended to offer comments on that study. My aim here is to neither praise nor criticize this study but to provide something of a literacy lens for viewing this work.

This commentary consists of several parts. All studies begin with research questions and so will this commentary. It is worth revisiting the conceptual framework that underpins this study and the questions that generated the data collection, both the questions that were asked and those that were not asked. The research questions shape the design of the study. So it will be helpful to explore this design, especially insofar as the design contributes to the findings and the authors' depiction of reality. I will conclude with a brief discussion of the major findings of the study and a few notes that may serve as recommendations for policymakers, publishers, and future researchers.

The Research Questions
The authors of the study describe the scope of the research as to:
1. *identify the reading habits and attitudes of the literate population of the Arab world.*
2. *gain understanding of the current state of readership and to segment the population into primary readership groups.*
3. *find out the primary, preferred and available mediums and channels for acquiring written/ printed information.*

These are ambitious goals. Although one may be skeptical about the authors' ability to identify the literate habits of "the Arab world" in a single study of this relatively modest scale, it does seem possible that a study like this can uncover or bring to the surface various factors that contribute to the reading habits and attitudes. Above, all it is helpful to approach this study as exploratory in nature. The authors and NextPage seem to be interested in identifying factors that influence who reads and who does not (or what gets read and what does not). Exploratory studies of this sort play a crucial role in setting out lines of future study. It is in this sense that the present study succeeds remarkably well.

The authors have used these seminal questions to construct a comprehensive survey instrument, one that appears to have generated a robust response. Their research questions deal with a range of literacy-related drivers. It seems clear that they have thought through a wide range of factors or stimuli that motivate people to read and they have also looked into an intriguing set of responses in terms of reading behaviors. These survey domains will be very useful for future scholars who wish to take any portion of this study into greater depth or to explore these issues using alternative research methods.

It may be something less, however, to suggest that the present study provides definitive and conclusive information about all Arabs. That would likely entail a much larger sampling pool and some corroborating or triangulating data sources to go with these self-reports. On the other hand the study seems to ask questions about the factors that trigger essential values and habits of reading. And the data such research questions yield begins to map out not only the literacy terrain, but the relative topography of that terrain.

What are the operational definitions embedded in these research questions? In general, the survey questions appear to define reading as a leisure activity or at least seem to prompt respondents toward this aspect of reading. For example, respondents (especially non-readers) seemed to be very sensitive to the limitations of the amount of free time they have available to read. Other survey questions asked when and where people like to read. Responses that Arab readers generally like to read evenings and weekends and that the typical place people preferred to read was in bed, again reflects a sense of reading as a leisure activity. This is quite different than asking point blank, "How do you use reading in your work?" Or, "What sorts of information do you get from reading?"

The questions the authors generated do indeed provide a wealth of important data. I will discuss that in the section on findings. The authors do an especially fine job of capturing certain aspects of the reading habit with the questions they ask. I would like to highlight here some additional questions this study of reading might have asked.

Let me give two examples. The study seems to segment respondents' time into various activities: sleeping, eating, working & homecare, and religious observance. We have a very good sense of respondents' home reading activities. But considerably less about these other areas of routine activity: the workplace, religious observation, etc and the spaces in between those daily events.

I wondered how employees in the Arab world access information and how that is connected to the world of work. My sense is Arabs read all sorts of catalogs, brochures, manuals, reports and other documents related to work. It would be interesting to know the role of print in the office, shop, market, or factory. There is a sense that reading is a distinct and special activity and not terribly embedded in the daily routine. It may be easier to capture reading habits using survey techniques when they are posited as distinct activities rather than when they are embedded somewhat inconspicuously into one's daily routine.

Another aspect of reading that seems to elude these research questions would be information literacy. The research questions look at the consumption of whole texts, such as books, magazines, or newspapers. I wondered how the study might have captured the sort of reading that takes place as people browse a wide variety of texts throughout each day searching for information, yet never completely reading any of these texts in entirety. One may check a recipe in the cookbook while preparing a meal. But is that reading? We may look through an owner's manual as we try to figure out how to program a video recorder. But is that reading? A merchant might look up the current market prices for gold or the currency rates for foreign exchange, glance at the headlines of the morning paper, or check the web for weather information. But does any of this count as reading?

The research questions reflect the exploratory nature of this study. I believe the authors were guided by research questions that were intended to be broad and all-encompassing. And obviously, a single study cannot embrace all of reading in its entirety. This is especially true for a survey. The point I wish to raise here is that there are many different

kinds of reading activities that take place during the day. The research questions that are at the heart of this study are framed by some definition of reading. Critical readers of this study will need to reflect on the extent to which these research questions mesh with their own definitions before rushing to conclusions and building strategic responses.

An additional set of questions that might be probed in future studies of this sort is to look more closely at the barriers to developing positive attitudes about reading and regular reading habits. The three research questions are aimed at describing the Arab reader. It turns out this survey does a good job of posing questions about the factors that might create *non-readers*—not enough time, materials were not interesting. Additional research questions might have asked what prevents some individuals from developing the same attitudes and habits that their peers developed. Can we attribute these preferences to individual difference? Or, are there cultural contexts and commercial infrastructures that influence attitudes and habits of reading and non-reading?

In some country cases the data suggest non-readers were an exceptionally large percentage of the sampling pool. Although some data were generated on this topic the research questions were clearly about the attitudes and habits of the literate populations of the Arab world. The factors of the Arab world that shape those attitudes and habits were not part of the overt research agenda. The authors have left this fertile field open to future researchers.

The Conceptual Framework: The Reader, the Text, and the Context
Reading is a dynamic process in which the reader interacts with the writer and, almost always, the consequence of reading is the interaction with other people as they talk about texts, authors, and topics. A study of reading habits must explore these dynamic components and their interaction. In the present research, the authors of the study may have used different labels for their analytical perspective, but many of the research questions do address these three critical components of the reading process—the Reader, the Text, and the Context. The work was particularly illuminating in this regard.

It seems straightforward to say that the individual reader brings a great deal to the reading process. His or her knowledge about reading, his or her competency in reading skills, her/his knowledge about why people read, his or her values gleaned from family or popular media and similar personal characteristics seem likely to influence attitudes and habits of reading. The research agenda reflects this importance of reader characteristics through its intent to segment the reading population in each country. Numerous questions about the respondents helped create some very strong characteristic images of males and females, young and mature, and representatives of various economic and education backgrounds. These census-like categorizations helped identify specific market behaviors and attitudes. Particularly striking was how consistent these segmentations of readers and non-readers were across the set of survey countries. The research questions help to provide valuable information about the reader, a crucial component of the reading process.

One aspect pertaining to the reader needs further investigation, however. That is, the

reader's knowledge of reading skills and strategies. Obviously the respondents' reading habits will be constrained by their competence as readers. Perhaps knowledge about reading may be more predictive than reader factors such as economic class or gender. Recent studies have shown that reading proficiency among Arabs is not widespread. Large portions of the general population are illiterate (the rates range up to 60% for females in some Arab countries).

Certainly the unusually high rate of illiteracy among Arab populations should figure into this overall picture. At least it seems impossible to make sense of this study without acknowledging the dire conditions of the broader context. But even here, with a study that attempts to focus on the literate population, that is, among respondents who reportedly had learned to read (at some point in their lives) it is not clear whether they had now or ever had sufficient capacity to read higher level texts such as non-fiction or even complex narratives.

A certain level of knowledge of reading skills and strategies is required to be able to make sense of most newspapers or journals. Some Arab education systems are still in the process of constructing a primary and secondary level explicit curricula for reading and writing. And while the majority of Arab teachers use texts in their instruction few provide specific instruction to their students regarding reading strategies. One cannot simply assume that attendance in primary or secondary school guarantees that individuals have acquired high levels of reading proficiency.

Although it may be beyond the scope of this present study to explore whether respondents are acquiring critical thinking strategies (such as inferential reading, or identifying bias or questioning the author, etc.) it certainly raises the question of whether the sort of education experiences Arabs are being provided are producing skillful competent readers. It seems at least worth raising this caveat less people who review the findings of the study construe that reading habits are simply a reflection of the amount of one's available free time or one's disposable income. The main barrier to reading (or more positively, the trigger for reading) may simply be the reader's knowledge of skills and strategies to independently read efficiently, effortless, and effectively.

The conceptual framework of reading as a dynamic interaction between readers, texts, and contexts implies that the texts will have an important role in determining who reads and who does not, what is read, and what is not. Literacy theorists describe "reader-friendly" texts as those text structures, vocabulary content, graphic and typographic features that guide reading. Even the most proficient and avid reader recognizes when she or he encounters a text that was poorly conceived, poorly written, or with a content and vocabulary load that is too dense to penetrate. Reader-friendly texts allow the reader ways to connect his or her life to the content of the text. This may mean using a language that is familiar to the reader or to representing positive images of the reader's culture, ethnicity, or gender.

The authors provide an exhaustive series of questions about texts, both hard copy and electronic formats. These questions generally dealt with favored text content. I found

these images of what the respondents read fascinating. The authors' findings should provide an excellent baseline for future researchers who can and should go deeper into this area. There seemed to be a consistency of the data reported from the different countries. The Q'uran and other religious texts were far and away the most widely read texts. This in itself was not terribly surprising. We often find that even in among secular communities the ability to read a religious text is one of main motivators for learning to read.

I found it puzzling that non-narrative texts seemed to have so little value amongst the respondents. In school people read because they are compelled to do so by their teachers. Out of school, people typically read because they perceive that a particular text will benefit them. In the US we see huge sections of the book store or library devoted to self-help books. There are books and magazines about ways to improve one's physical health and appearance, one's golf game, or finances. We have books about childcare and books about homecare. And perhaps the most paradoxical are the shelves of books about how to make sense of technology, film and music. From the nature of the questions and the responses it seemed that such text *content* exist in the Arab world and that the respondents were aware of them. And still they were not motivated to read them. I wondered why, and wished the study had probed further in the area of text topics.

There seemed to be less inquiry into the other aspects of text *structure*. The study does inquire about language preferences—Arabic, English, and French. But there are other issues of text design that include layouts, the use of color, the quality of paper stock, ink, and binding, text density (that is, the amount of running uninterrupted print), or the use of graphics that contribute to reader preferences. Issues pertaining to the nature and use of illustrations may be particularly important in this cultural context.

The issue of texts certainly warrants further study. The authors provide an excellent baseline here. But texts are not monolithic. Not all books, magazines and newspapers are alike. This seems to be an excellent opening for some document analyses. What are the text characteristics of popular books, magazines, and newspapers? Publishers will almost certainly need more data on how these elements of texts combine with platforms and content to contribute to the reading habits of Arab readers. Future researchers may also want to triangulate these self-reports with evidence from book sales or lending libraries, or conduct in-depth case studies.

Finally, in regards to the reading dynamic the theoretical framework suggests that the *context* in which people read will play an important role in determining who reads, what is read, and why. Competent readers everywhere acknowledge that they read differently in different settings and when confronted with different purposes. One reads differently when at home or at work. Similarly one reads differently for work than for pleasure. One approaches reading differently when the context is one of entertainment than when the context is one of business. But we also know that motivation to read can be powerfully influenced by peers. Readers are more likely to engage in reading when they are part of a community of readers—a book club, library, family and so forth. Knowing about the reading context can help us better understand the role of reading and the external factors

that promote reading.

Despite the fact that an exploration of the reading context was not specifically stated as one of the research questions the authors produce considerable data about the context in which reading is presented and in which reading takes place. Questions about specific aspects of the reading context (book sellers, media, peers, libraries, families, fairs and so forth) yielded spectacularly dismal images. Worse, this seemed consistent across the entire set of target countries. For example, questions about first exposure to print were particularly informative. The majority of respondents said their first exposure to reading came in school. This seemed an unusual contrast to other cultural contexts where children are routinely exposed to print at pre-school ages. The bedtime story is a fairly strong and widespread tradition in the other cultures. In fact, many people who are passionate about reading attribute their love of reading and their reading habits to a parent or older sibling and trace their positive experiences with print at an early age. Indeed, in some cultural contexts children enter school as independent readers, or at least with a fairly well-established knowledge of letters, texts, and why people read. These values and habits are learned at home.

Obviously if parents are not readers it can hardly be expected for them to inspire the reading habit in their children. And yet, we find it almost universal that parents want their children to succeed and surpass them. The image presented here is that parents in the Arab world are not motivated to provide their children with early exposure to print. This finding should stimulate further research into family literacy or what types of reading and writing goes on at home, especially the reading context of homes with young children.

It struck me that the lack of early exposure to reading may reflect access to quality children's materials. In the West we are fortunate to have traditional folktales and myths but also counting books, alphabet books, picture books and concept books as well as. There are books on every subject from dinosaurs to spaceships. The quality of these texts is reflected in the number of awards for children's books (Caldecott, Newberry, etc.) It would be interesting to see what sorts of options beyond cartoon books and Disney characters are available in the bookstores and library shelves.

Other findings about the reading context were intriguing. I found the questions about how people learn about new books fascinating. On the one hand it was impressive to see that reading context had so many venues for promoting reading such as television programs, libraries, the internet, and book fairs. And yet curious that very few respondents, in any of the countries, felt that these cultural features influenced their attitudes and habits of reading. This raises important questions about marketing of reading materials. But it also raises important concerns about shaping the cultural context to better support reading and the demand for reading materials. These data will be useful to future researchers who choose to explore this topic at greater depth.

On the other hand, I found it paradoxical that respondents reported they learned about new books through their family and friends. Is there a dichotomy between formal elements of the reading context and informal features? Reading seems to be part of the

normal social discourse, at least for some people. If sharing books, loaning books, or simply recommending books are parts of the daily conversations between family members, friends, and co-workers I would have expected a higher value for reading overall. It is almost as if there does exist a culture of reading. But are the majority of the Arab respondents spectators or players?

Still within the realm of exploring the reading context, I was hoping to have more data about the impact of the national literacy campaigns that have been launched in various Arab countries. Many of the First Ladies of the region--Egypt, Qatar, and Jordan are notable examples--have been at the forefront of national literacy campaigns in the Arab world. An exploration of the respondents' awareness of these major initiatives and if these initiatives were having the intended impact would have been valuable information.

One last comment on this section, I found the issues of book ownership very important. Questions about the number of books people owned and whether they kept these books in special places provide important insights about the reading context. It is a subtle but powerful insight about people that we reveal what we value most by what we put on display for others. For some people it is photographs of their family or their children's artwork. For others it may be sports trophies. But for readers, it is certainly shelves and tables of books. I would liked the authors to have explore this aspect in greater depth. What were these special places? special cases? shelves? cabinets? Were these public places like a sitting room or private places like a bedroom? Future research in this field may include home or office visits to better document how people display or keep the texts they have purchased and read.

To summarize then, in describing the reading habits of these respondents the authors have constructed survey questions that generated robust and consistent reports. Whether intentional or not, many questions explore the dynamic interactions between the reader, the text, and the reading context. It might be useful, especially for non-technical readers of this study if the authors might have explicitly framed their findings in this way. It might be worthwhile to re-analyze the data of this study into these conceptual components. This conceptual framework might be valuable for those wishing to build onto this baseline data and to explore these three dynamics in greater detail. In the end, though, the authors provide much data about these facets, enough to compel additional research.

Research Design and Methodology
In this section I offer comments on the design methodology of the study. I confine my remarks to three elements: the survey questionnaire, the sampling, and the presentation of the data.

Any study of this sort, to be useful, must first be credible. The credibility of a study is determined by *validity* and *reliability*. Validity is the sense that a study is actually an exploration of what it purports to be. If the study is not a measure of reading habits, but of something else then it is clearly not very useful nor credible even if it was technically implemented well. Reliability is the measure to which the procedures yield similar

findings whenever it is replicated. Reliability refers to the trustworthiness of the data. If the design does not yield consist results when it is replicated we can only assume that the results are determined by chance, misunderstanding, or error in correctly scoring the data.

What can be said of the validity of this study? The authors have designed a survey that purports to reveal the reading habits of individuals in the Arab world. I found the range of issues covered in the survey to be remarkably comprehensive. The authors explore not only the reading habits of the respondents, but their attitudes about reading as well. Both sets of data are relevant. In certain areas I would have urged the authors to go further or probe additional areas. But this study was conceived as baseline investigation and sheds light on a number of important aspects of the reading habit. As stated earlier the study also points to additional areas that demand further exploration. This by no means diminishes the present study. Work such is this succeeds when it encourages future study.

The authors have staked out an enormous territory of reading habits that includes personal preferences about genres, access, language, purchase points, as well as where and when people prefer to read. I believe this data will provide valuable insights for scholars, publishers, marketers, donors, and policymakers.

The validity of survey data, however, can be less than precise. At any rate, survey data can hardly be construed as conclusive. I would have urged conservative restraint based on the limitations of survey methodology. Several factors might be considered as the findings of this study are considered. One important distinction between survey methodology and experimental designs or case studies is that surveys do not allow for direct observation of participants' behaviors. Survey data consists of self-reports. Self-reports can be inflated or under-represented. But more importantly, this data is subject to various layers of interpretation. Concepts that may be surprisingly difficult to pin down include *reading* or even *book*. It is above all, the ambiguous nature of these concepts that can have some effect on the validity of the study.

No two individuals read the same text in the same way. We differ in the way we approach informational books and novels because of our diverse cultural and personal backgrounds, our knowledge of texts and reading and our purposes (that is, the reading dynamic). We cannot treat reading as a single common cognitive experience. And if we do, we may jeopardize the validity of the study. This may be especially important when exploring non-linear texts such as newspapers, magazines, and internet media. Because of the newness of these new platforms, we know relatively less about how readers approach these texts and how the reading experience may vary among individuals, tasks, and contexts.

Is there a difference between *reading* a newspaper and *scanning* the headlines and sampling some stories? Now, the internet has introduced a new term, *browsing*. Is this reading? Or is this some new form of communication? In one sense I suspect that most people have "reading" defined for them by their primary school teachers. That appears to be the case judging from the responses to prompts about first exposure to reading. These personal definitions of reading are essentially bundled together with serious tasks such as

acquiring new vocabulary, reading aloud, recitation, memorization, quizzes, and book reports. These early connotations of reading are so painfully etched into young minds it is small wonder that many people in the Arab world (and everywhere else!) tend to carry these scars well into adulthood and think of reading as a school task. Is it this image of reading as a school-like experience, as vague as that might be, that respondents are referring to when they are asked about their reading habits.

As pointed out above, the notion of what constitutes a text is hardly straightforward anymore. Even commonplace concepts as book, magazine, and newspaper can prove to be extremely variable. What standards should be applied? Should all magazines resemble the Economist? All newspapers resemble the Times of London? Must a text have some specific minimum of length or some degree of difficulty to be worthy of the status of "book." Today publishers have designed a range of texts to meet every conceivable reader's interest and reading competency. They have introduced a new range of lengths and page layouts. Increasingly publishers are venturing into multi-layered texts that include on-page graphics and illustrations, CD-ROMs, and on-line data as well. These new technologies are expanding our notions of what constitutes a text. What term should be used to describe the practice of sending text messages through mobile phones? It may be that the Arab-speaking market is lagging behind this level of technological innovation or even the diversity of print texts, but this diversity of "texts" and "reading" is undeniably the future trend of reading.

Again the point is to be aware that what seems straightforward may be more complex. That does not mean the study is not valid, but it introduces a sense of caution about interpreting the validity of the study and its findings. This sort of ambiguity, of course, lays the foundation for future studies and further replications.

There is also an important layer of interpretation at work in this study. The survey items have been translated from Arabic into English. This opens the door to the possibility that the contents under study here may be ambiguous. Can we be certain that the study investigates phenomena it purports to when key concepts are moving back and forth between languages?

Without being able to cite a specific instance in which terminology translation is significant it is almost a certainty that word meanings shift when they are translated, especially when technical terms are used. One example is the term *literacy*. This term does not translate well into Arabic except that it seems to connote the opposite of "illiteracy". Literate behavior is easily distinguished from illiterate behavior, but in absolute terms not in degrees. In English we can say one person (or class of people or a country) is more literate than another. This concept does not translate easily. What about other key terms like *reading, texts*, or similar concepts in this investigation? I am not familiar with the Arabic language but I am fairly confident there are areas of interpretation at work in this study that are the result of language translations. It may be that there is no way to control for such interpretation. But it would be useful if the authors could provide to the readers of this study a caveat to this effect.

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These comments should not be construed as questioning the validity of the study. It is only to point out that validity, while superficially self-evident, can actually be quite challenging. In addition to simply encouraging the authors to acknowledge these issues another suggestion for authors and the consumers of this information would be to draw upon similar studies and the definitions that were generated in similar contexts. In addition to national education studies of reading in the Arab world, multinational organizations such as the World Bank, UNESCO, and UNDP have looked at these issues. It would help establish the validity if the authors could situate the present study with these other works.

The reliability of the survey was exceptional. The survey was replicated in nine countries and the findings were remarkably robust and consistent. Some survey items seemed particularly designed to demonstrate reliability (such as preferred language of reading, or knowledge of television programs, or reasons for cessation of reading). But it seems that the survey questions were generally constructed in such a way as to yield consistent data in each of the case study countries.

At first I was bothered by the low number of respondents in particular sets of the data. It seems questionable to claim that the responses of less than a hundred people can be said to represent the reading habits and attitudes of all Jordanians or Egyptians let alone all Arabs. That these trends repeatedly turned up in each of the case study replications was somewhat reassuring in terms of the reliability of the data. All the same, I would caution the authors about making sweeping conclusions based on these small sampling sizes.

Because the purpose of this study was to establish some baseline trends and impressions it is sufficient to acknowledge that such trends seemed to re-occur in each of nine replications. Survey data such as this should not be presented as a form of conclusive and definitive evidence. There's simply too much variance in the data.

One question about the sampling pool was why these nine countries were selected for the study? The authors do not give an explanation of how these countries were selected and what about these countries makes them representative of the "Arab world."

The authors present a considerable amount of data in this study. The presentation is generally clear and user-friendly. Tables were clearly labeled and straightforward in content. I found that these data tables showed important distinctions among the respondents.

I appreciated the consistent outline, format, and sequence of presentation. After the second country-level report the format became predictable. I appreciated the brief country summaries in each section. These summaries provided important observations and highlighted significant findings at-a-glance.

I offer only a few questions regarding the presentation of data. First, I wondered why the data from so-called non-readers were included in the study of reading habits. In effect, the authors present two studies here: a study of the habits and attitudes of readers and

another study of the habits and attitudes of non-readers.

I can understand this survey produced some useful data about non-readers, but was this was time well spent? It is not clear from the original research questions that the attitudes and habits of non-readers were of primary concern. The survey protocol might have had a discontinue branch if the respondent failed to meet a certain qualifying level (in this case, that was whether the respondent had read a book, magazine, or newspaper within the last twelve months).

Apparently, since the researchers had decided to collect this data about non-readers, it seems reasonable to present it. My suggestion would be to present this data in a separate collection. Indeed, the authors go to great lengths to separate these data in the present format (because the sets of readers and non-readers do not interact.) It would greatly simplify the presentation of the reading habits of readers if the study of non-readers was pulled out and placed in a separate collection.

I also wondered why the authors did not make a greater effort to collate the findings to present a study of what Arabs read. It is, after all the theme of this work (and not "What Jordanians read" or "What Egyptians read" etc.). Although the sample size for each country was rather small, it might have been interesting to have created an aggregated image presented in the front of the country level studies. I did find the cross-country comparisons useful, easy to read and informative. The countries selected for this study share some important characteristics but there is also great diversity among Arab countries. I wondered how this diversity might have influenced reading attitudes and behaviors.

And, although this was apparently beyond the aim of this study I wondered why the authors did not attempt to build some sort of composite image of the Arab reader. The authors go to great lengths to present reading habits by age, gender, economic status and so forth and present all sorts of performance data such as number of books purchased, number of books read, amount of time spent reading, etc. I would have liked the authors to have carried this presentation one step further. The data might have been used to hypothesize the characteristics of the Arab reader. There are statistical tools available to determine the relative strengths of the factors the authors inquired about and to assess the degrees to which each factor contribute to the reading habit. From a publisher's perspective as well as policy and program developers, this sort of strategic profile would seem valuable.

The Findings and Implications
The study was commissioned to achieve three main objectives:
1. To identify the reading habits and attitudes of the literate population of the Arab world.
2. To gain understanding of the current state of readership and to segment the public into primary readership groups.
3. To find out the primary, preferred, and available mediums and channels for acquiring written /printed materials.

The wealth of data presented in these country level reports show clearly that the authors have indeed achieved these main objectives. The authors present detailed characterizations of reading attitudes and habits of a sampling of adults across nine different national contexts. I found these data to be credible, trustworthy, and informative. In certain places in this commentary I've pointed out aspects that warrant additional inquiry. Hopefully, as this study receives widespread distribution it will spur other researchers to address these and other related issues not captured in the present study. Such is the nature of useful research.

I have also tried, in this commentary, to raise certain issues that might be considered as caveats for anyone trying to make sense of these data. Chief among these is the need to provide a conceptual framework for reading. I offered one framework that characterizes reading as a dynamic interaction between the reader, the text, and the reading context. The study provides, as it set out to do, a great deal of data about readers, some valuable data about the texts these readers read, and some insights about the contexts in which Arab readers read.

The authors devised and apparently followed a strict procedure for collecting and presenting data. And if this data does not warrant conclusions about what Arabs read, they certainly provide valuable insights or hypotheses based on the responses and self-reports of several hundred respondents in each country. These trends can serve as important baselines and should stake out important terrains for future explorations and analyses.

What inferences and applications then can be made from the findings of this study?

The study provides some very important data about the Arab reader. Among other things we learn that this person tends to be well-educated, with sufficient disposable income and personal time to devote to reading. We learn that although these readers value reading they do not seem to be attuned to typical book promotion media such as special television programs, book fairs, or public libraries. We also find that they overwhelmingly prefer to read in Arabic and read mainly for information and religious content.

In some ways this is hardly surprising. And yet, when the data from all nine countries are compared, there seems to be a remarkable uniformity across these cultural contexts. While conducted to ascertain the attitudes and habits of Arab readers, perhaps this study is also and maybe more importantly a study of Arab culture(s) that produced those attitudes and habits. The study not only delivers on its promised objectives but also offers important "next steps" to publishers, educators, parents and policy makers.

For commercial publishers the news the authors present here cannot be encouraging. Arab readers seem remarkably impervious to book marketing and promotional activities. The data did not seem to reflect any sort of problems with access to print. Respondents seemed to feel they had ample texts in their mother tongue and at prices that were acceptable. Although I am not familiar with popular Arabic literature in general, I was

surprised that the respondents' awareness of the range of reading preferences seemed relatively narrow.

More curious, though, I was struck by the impression that Arab readers do not seem to be exposed to contemporary works of international literature (either narrative or expository texts). I wondered why prize winning authors, Nobel laureates, and best-selling authors from outside the Arab world did not show up on readers' lists with greater frequency. Are there barriers that constrain reading texts authored from outside the Arab world? If so are these barriers uniform across different Arabic cultures?

This study raises questions about publishers' collections and how well these materials fit the Arab culture. It also offers some discouraging news about marketing reading material in the Arab world. Either publishers will need to re-design the sorts of book promotion activities they currently employ or they will need to invent new strategies and incentives to get books, newspapers, journals and electronic media into the hands of Arab readers. Their capacity to enlighten, to inspire, and to entertain notwithstanding, books and other reading materials are commodities very much like any other commodity. Perhaps the information in this study will help publishers begin to redesign their book promotion campaigns to more effectively meet the needs and interests of the reading public.

One recurring theme in each of the countries was the notion of reading as a leisure time activity. Perhaps this was a function of the specific survey questions. Respondents seemed to conceive of reading as requiring a great deal of time (consistently the major explanation of why people stopped reading), specific days of the week, even specific places. Perhaps the marketing strategy is to build on these notions of reading. But publishers can help to expand this view of reading. Such a strategy should go beyond simply exhorting people to read more. Publishers can and should exploit opportunities to bring texts more seamlessly into the daily lives of Arab adults.

Before policy makers or publishing marketers begin to organize activities based on these data there should be a thorough and frank exploration of the social context in which all of these reading (and non-reading) attitudes and habits appear to be emerging. It may seem counter-intuitive that an act which is typically conducted on one's own in the privacy of one's silent consciousness is in fact an extremely social and public phenomenon. Anyone attempting to design programs intended to increase readership in the Arab world would do well, I believe, to consider this cultural context. One image this study presents is the characteristics of the Arabic culture as shaping these reading attitudes and habits.

There are certainly implications here for educators. The categorization scheme used in this study characterized respondents by education levels among other attributes. I was struck by the fact that C2 respondents were those who were primary school graduates and DE respondents were those with less or no schooling at all. If I understand the data correctly, in some cases this education level constituted the majority (up to 70 %) of the sample. These data seem to agree with other international assessments of literacy levels in the Arab world.

What Arabs Read: A Commentary by J.M. Wile, PhD.

It is difficult to see how any sort of marketing or promotional campaign can be expected have much impact on raising the reading habits of those who do not possess sufficient reading competencies. People simply will not persist in activities which they find difficult. Attempting to make sense of complex adult reading material would be extremely challenging for anyone with less than a secondary school degree and even at that one assumes that sophisticated reading strategies are explicitly taught in those primary and secondary grades.

It is simply not clear that Arabic education is providing explicit instruction in reading strategies, indeed, the sorts of higher level strategies that are likely to enable students to become life-long learners. Perhaps this data will encourage education policymakers to revisit their primary and secondary school curricula to see how reading is presented in those schools.

Along the same lines, I would expect the findings from this study to cause teacher educators to explore the attitudes and habits of the education workforce. The study suggests the vast majority of respondents received their initial exposure to reading when they entered primary school. If that is the case, one might wonder what sorts of models these primary school teachers are providing. Are teachers reading aloud to students? Are teachers readers themselves? How are reading activities presented in the classroom? What sorts of activities take place at the classroom level or the school level to promote reading? What are the attempts to link school and home through positive reading and writing activities? An ethnographic study of schools and classrooms in various Arabic countries would help to shed light on these formative experiences.

Teacher educators should also re-examine the sorts of pre-service courses teacher candidates are required to complete. What kind of knowledge about reading and writing and what kind of knowledge of reading strategies and technical skills should be standard for all teachers? If literacy standards for teachers do not already exist, perhaps this study can encourage that sort of action.

Finally, this study raises important issues about the Arab culture. Is reading in the Arab culture significantly different than reading in the non-Arab world? It appears the authors are suggesting this is the case. And if that is so, it is simply not clear what aspects of Arab cultural traditions and the present day political economy are shaping individual attitudes and habits. There are some important issues awaiting social scientists in this region.

Some insights are hinted at in this study. We learn that readers tend to learn about good books from family and friends more so than they do from watching television or going to book fairs or other reading promotion events. We learn that although Arab readers may hold library cards, they tend to loan and borrow books from their friends and families.

As a non-Arab I can only speculate on the significance of these data. But I would suggest that the key to increasing Arab reading may rest with the family more than the economics of the marketplace. The authors present an image of the family as a strong force in the

Arab community, especially in the community of readers. But even the family has its limitations. Few respondents referred to early reading experiences in the home. Researchers may want to explore early childhood and family-rearing habits in the Arab world to learn more about the role parents, siblings and extended families play in developing positive attitudes and habits of reading. One potential strategy for increasing the reading habit might be to address family literacy.

The study provided interesting insights into *what* Arab readers read. The study also offers important data on *why* Arabs read. Certainly, reading is intrinsically pleasurable for some people. But far and away, literacy theorists and researchers concur that reading is above all a functional tool people use to accomplish some personally valuable purpose or to achieve some high value goal. The self-improving nature of reading as an informing process is a component of a fluid society in which individuals constantly attempt to escape boundaries of gender, wealth, physical ability, and experience to create new selves that are more productive and more vibrant.

The majority of respondents in this study did not see reading as a fundamental way to improve their own lives. Ultimately, this says more about the respondents' world view and the cultures they inhabit than it does about reading. We may want to believe that individual readers shape their culture but the research question of how Arab culture shapes individual readers certainly warrants consideration in future research in this field. To understand the nature of reading in the Arab world future researchers will need to construct their studies and match their findings to the exceedingly useful information the authors provide us in this study about what Arabs read.