

# Screens

## And the future of long-form reading

Adriaan van der Weel



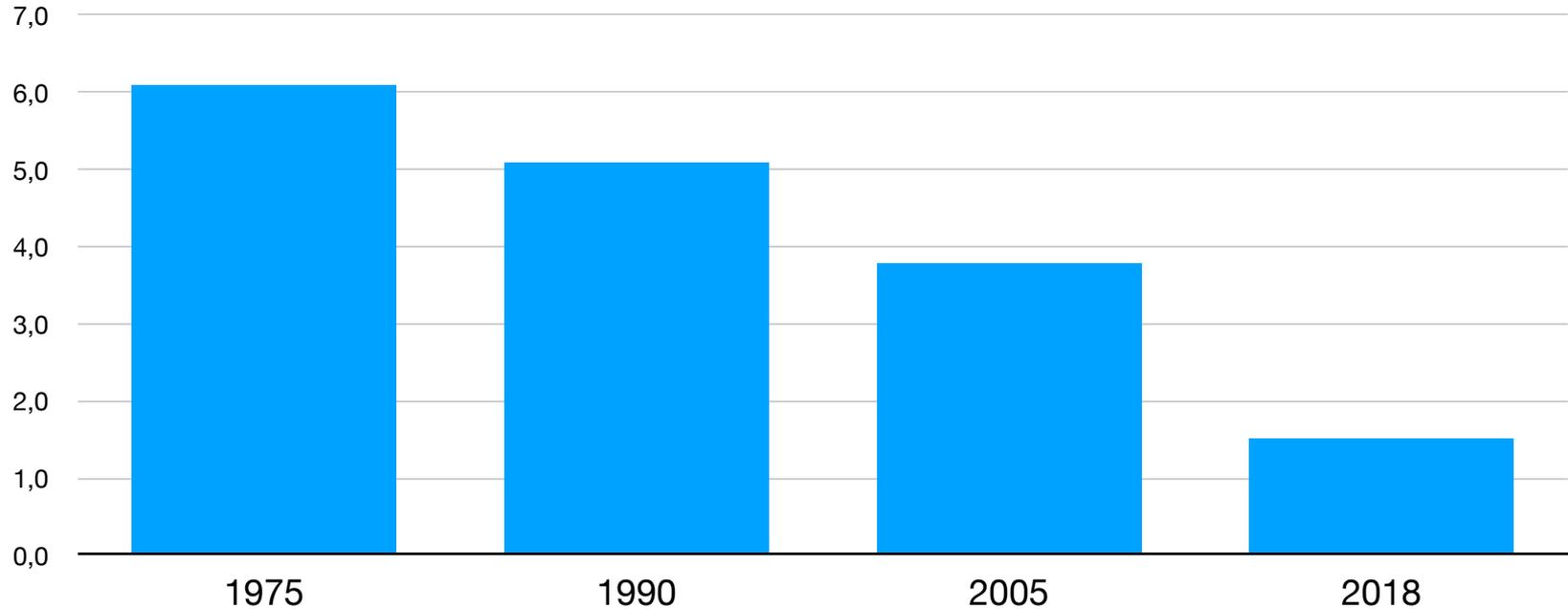
**Universiteit  
Leiden**  
The Netherlands

# Declining amount of longform reading

- See for example:
  - Twenge et al 2019
  - Baron 2015
  - Kovač and Van der Weel 2018
  - OECD 2019
  - Et cetera

# Reading (hours per week; NL)

Reading (hours per week)

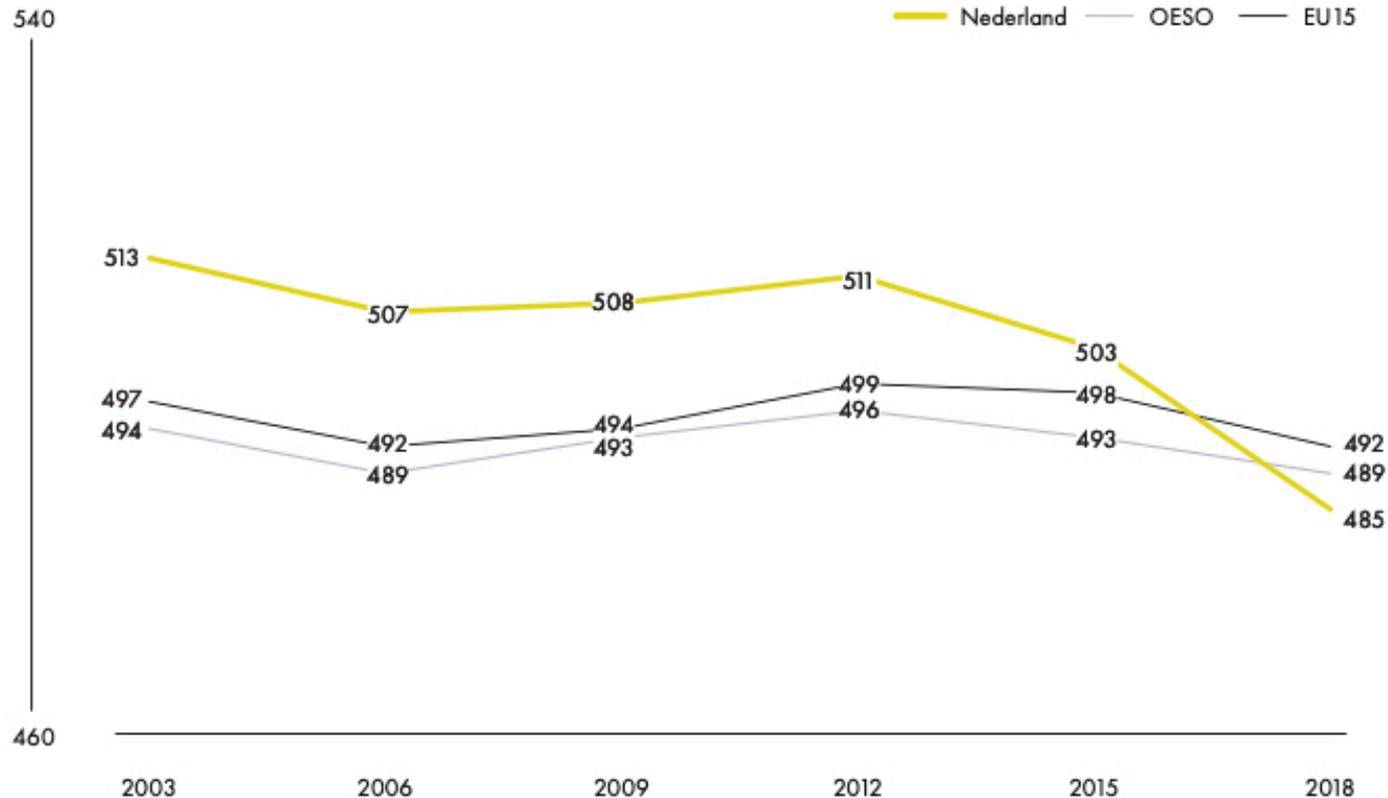


- NB: Relevance of age: young people read less than this average
- Source: Tijdsbestedingsonderzoek, SCP and CBS

# Declining reading enjoyment

- PISA ... shows that students seem to read less for leisure and to read fewer books of fiction, magazines or newspapers because they want to (as opposed to because they have to). Instead, they read more to fulfil practical needs, and they read more in online formats, such as chats, online news or websites containing practical information. In 2018, **more students considered reading 'a waste of time'** (+5 percentage points, on average across OECD countries) and **fewer students read for enjoyment** (-5 percentage points) than their counterparts did in 2009. (OECD 2019, p. 14)

# Declining reading proficiency



Average reading proficiency 2003-2018 (Netherlands vs OESO and EU15)

Source: *Resultaten PISA-2018 in vogelvlucht*, 2019

# The role of screens



# The controversy

- Screens pose a serious threat to the time-hallowed reading practices that have decisively shaped our civilisation
- Screens offer novel and exciting opportunities for improving the dissemination of human knowledge

# Screens are a significant influence

- Surveys and empirical research
  - NL: Kees Broekhof et al., *Cijfers en meningen over lezen in Nederland*, 2019, [www.sardes.nl](http://www.sardes.nl) ['Sardes']
  - DE: <https://www.boersenblatt.net/archiv/1422566.html>
  - <https://www.boersenverein.de/markt-daten/marktforschung/studien-umfragen/studie-buchkaeuffer-quo-vadis/>
  - Et cetera

# *How do screens contribute to the crisis?*



- Anne Mangen, Adriaan van der Weel, Miha Kovač

# E-READ: Stavanger Declaration

- Importance of longform reading
  - ‘Reading long-form texts is invaluable for a number of cognitive achievements, such as concentration, vocabulary building and memory’
- The technology used for reading is ‘not neutral’
- There is incontrovertible evidence of a ‘screen disadvantage’
  - ‘Lower reading comprehension outcomes for digital texts compared to printed texts’
- <https://ereadcost.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/StavangerDeclaration.pdf>

# Screens are here to stay



# Two courses of action

1. Discover how to counteract the ‘screen disadvantage’
  - Establish causes
2. Encourage long-form reading from print
  - Attentive (‘deep’) reading from print remains the best allround technology for comprehension and thinking

# 1. Causes of the screen disadvantage: Taking a broader perspective



# The individual vs the social perspective

- Empirical research concentrates on the individual reading experience
  - E.g., cognitive overhead of scrolling and hypertext
- The sociotechnical perspective can look at the aggregate, longer-term development
  - E.g., the nature of the broader digital infrastructure
- Both types of research are needed

# Compare Gutenberg's printing press

- Its technological characteristics determine its epoch-making effect on society



# Similarly with the digital infrastructure

- Examine its technological characteristics



# Hypotheses on the screen disadvantage

- The association of screens with distraction
  - caused by the multitude of potential activities competing for attention (especially involving modalities that are less cognitively demanding than reading)
- The unrealistic sense of agency and control fostered by screens, contributing to overconfidence
- The undermining of textual authority by
  - The ephemeral nature of both form and content of digital text
  - The 'cheapening' of authorship following from the fact that anyone can publish online and be an 'author'
  - The lack of predictability and reliability of the user interface compared to paper

# The longer-term perspective

- Enables us to see societal changes
- Requires more interpretation than empirical research
- Presents a major political challenge...

## 2. Encourage long-form print reading



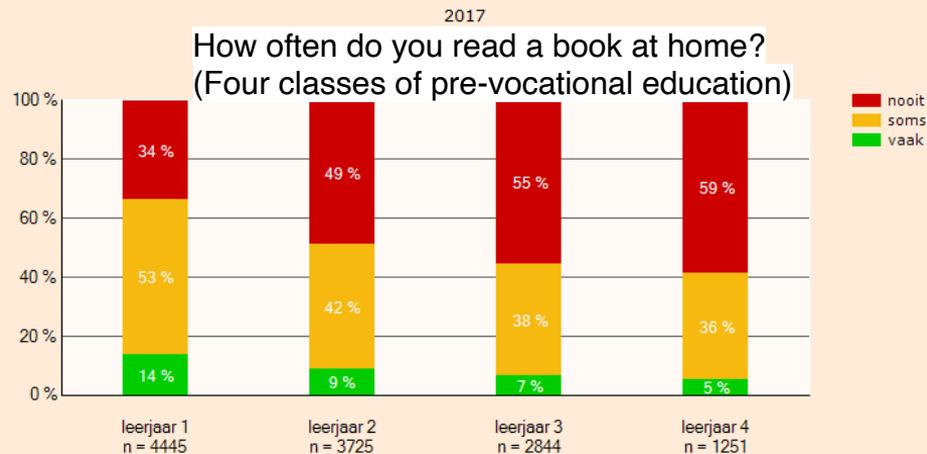
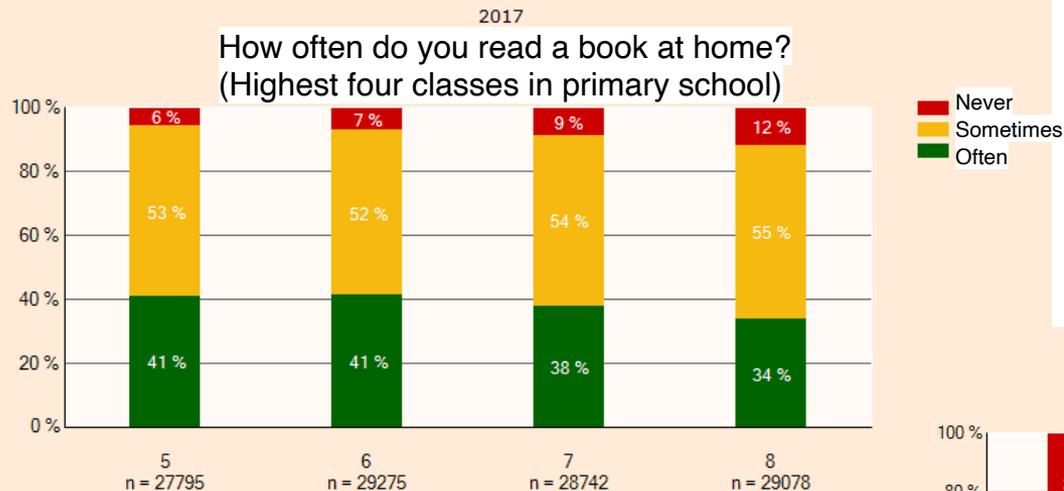
# The point of departure

- Students of all ages have trouble to find the discipline and concentration for long-form texts
- Lack of time time is frequently cited as a motive for not reading
- BUT:
- Students appear to have a latent interest in reading
- Students have a preference for printed books

# Most encouragement is needed

- For weaker readers
  - They are the first to defect, using easier modalities
- When reading motivation and pleasure begin to go down
  - When students discover the digital world and social media
  - In NL: upper level primary school

# Declining reading frequency (NL)



Source: Kees Broekhof et al., 'Cijfers en meningen over lezen in Nederland', 2019, [www.sardes.nl](http://www.sardes.nl) ['Sardes']

# Positioning reading in the curriculum

- Emphasise the integral role of reading
  - Not only in first-language curriculum
  - Reading skills are vital for **all** school subjects and **all** learning

# Create an environment conducive to reading

- Offer help for selecting
  - NL: Students need help to know what to read!
- Talk about books with students (parents and educators)
- Provide well stocked school libraries
- Paper books (preferred by students) offer an opportunity to escape from the screen world

# The carrot versus the stick

- Encouragement or compulsion?
  - Big issue in NL



[a.h.van.der.weel@hum.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:a.h.van.der.weel@hum.leidenuniv.nl)



**Universiteit  
Leiden**  
The Netherlands