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# **Academic (Non) Reading from the Perspective of “User Friendliness”: An Insight from the Fields of the Sociology of Literature and of Multimedia**

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The purpose of this article is to draw the reader's attention to an important issue in the Polish edition of an international research project inspired by Columbia University in New York, namely, the matter of user convenience in accessing texts, which translates into reading – or, in fact, merely into the possibility of reading. These topics have received only marginal attention in the field of the sociology of literature and the media.

The very fact that such a quantitative study inspired by an American university was even conducted in Poland is itself fascinating, as it illustrates the internationalization of social studies on multimedia readership. Other international quantitative multimedia studies have also been conducted, including the World Internet Project, which has been part of the discussion on the Internet and online readership since 2010.<sup>1</sup> While these studies are often inspiring, they can also sometimes pose an obstacle in examining the subject. Nevertheless, the overall balance of such projects should be considered positive.

The Polish edition of the study discussed in this article, namely, the study on multimedia readership inspired by researchers from Columbia University, is thus

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1 Piotr Toczyski et al., *World Internet Project. Poland 2012* (Warszawa: Agora S.A. & TP Group, 2012).

yet another in a series of projects that have the potential to depict Poland's "interactive" and "multimedia" character in an international context. Unfortunately, the results of research conducted in other parts of the world are not yet available. Waiting for their publication may turn out to be counterproductive, as even in the case of the World Internet Project there seems to be no cohesive methodology that would guarantee cross-national cognitive cohesion.

A cursory glance at Polish research in this field encourages reflection on the state of contemporary academic texts, which span – like many other products of the written word and their readers today – “the virtual and printed text.”<sup>2</sup> The perspective on the subject presented herein will be an innovation with regard to the issue at hand, but it is still an insufficient response to a much more far-reaching challenge: to depict the Polish results in a global context.

### The Background and Current Literature on the Subject

A good backdrop for the discussion of the results can be found in other studies of readership in Poland, which I discussed in the press – at the time a medium that actually permitted astute analysis – where I made the claim that “he who does not read is twice as important as he who does.”<sup>3</sup> This statement was a reference to the fact that the National Library, which commissions the most widely-cited readership surveys in Poland, seems more eager to calculate the number of non-readers of books than to emphasize the population or percentage of actual readers. Many may find it disconcerting to see an emphasis being placed on data showing that, over the past year (2012, in this case), 60.8 percent of Poles had not read a single book.<sup>4</sup>

Studies commissioned by the National Library display an annual fluctuation: non-readers apparently made up 56 percent of the population in 2010, while the results for 2008 and 2006 were 62.2 and 50.3 percent, respectively. What could possibly make the number of people who had not picked up a book initially grow by 12 percentage points following 2006, only to drop by 6 and then rise again by 4 points? The simplest explanation could be that the surveys were conducted on different samples that is either people 15 and

2 Piotr Toczyński, “Między tekstem wydrukowanym a wirtualnym,” in *Korzystanie z mediów a podziały społeczne. Kompetencje medialne Polaków w ujęciu relacyjnym*, ed. Mirosław Filiciak (Warszawa: Centrum Cyfrowe, 2013).

3 Piotr Toczyński, “43,6% Polaków to zadeklarowani nieczytelnicy książek,” *Duży Format*, August 6, 2013, 2.

4 Roman Chymkowski, Izabela Koryś and Olga Dawidowicz-Chymkowska, “Społeczny zasięg książki w Polsce w 2012 r.,” (Warszawa: Biblioteka Narodowa, 2013), accessed March 27, 2014, <http://www.bn.org.pl/download/document/1362741578.pdf>

older or 18 and older. However, the results compiled in the document provide no such information.<sup>5</sup>

The issue of readership in Poland has also been examined in another study, one preceding Columbia University's intended examination of the use of multimedia – including multimedia text – in academia in Poland. The World Internet Project study, conducted on an equally well-selected and sufficiently numerous sample of Poles, indicates a greater number of readers than non-readers. The results of that survey show that in 2012, only 29 percent of Poles were non-readers, a very minor change compared to 2010 and 2011.<sup>6</sup>

Now that we know that in mid-2012 the non-reading population amounted to at least 29 percent (according to the World Internet Project) and at most 60.8 percent (late in the year, according the National Library, we can examine a third data source: the results obtained by the Center for Public Opinion Research (CBOS).

At the start of every year, CBOS pollsters conduct a survey of the number of Poles who claim to read at least one book per year for pleasure. These data cover the past 25 years.<sup>7</sup> They show that the number of non-readers grew over the first five years following the systemic transformation, from 36 percent in 1988 to 43 percent in 1993. According to the cited surveys, the number has since fallen below 40 percent only once, in 1996. Interestingly enough – from the point of view of this comparison – the survey conducted by the National Library that year provided similar results. Meanwhile, in 2000 both CBOS and the National Library found the number of non-readers to be 46 percent, while the values for 2002 and 2004 were almost identical, with the CBOS survey placing the value at 43 percent non-readers, and the National Library reporting 41.8 percent. Since 2006, however, the two institutions have published diverging results. In 2008 there was a difference of 8 percentage points between them, a discrepancy that rose to 17 points in 2008 and 14 in 2010.

The data presented in Table 1 shed light on the discrepancies in the survey results cited above and offer a better understanding of the context of this incongruity. It is a list of surveys conducted since 2014 which studied the reading habits of a nationwide, representative sample of Poles.<sup>8</sup>

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5 Ibid.

6 Toczyski et al., *World Internet Project. Poland 2012*.

7 Michał Feliksiak, *Aktywności i doświadczenia Polaków w 2012 roku* (Warszawa: CBOS, 2013), accessed March 27, 2014, [http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2013/K\\_013\\_13.PDF](http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2013/K_013_13.PDF)

8 Piotr Toczyski, *Wokół kierunków i form transformacji czytelnictwa w Polsce (o genezie, źródłach, celach, metodach i realizacji badania zmian czytelnictwa)*, (2014), accessed June 4, 2015, <https://depot.ceon.pl/handle/123456789/5930>

It is worth noting that the institution responsible for carrying out the majority of book readership surveys in Poland is the aforementioned Center for Public Opinion Research, rather than the widely-cited National Library, though not all of CBOS's studies are initiated by the center itself. The questions posed by CBOS pollsters vary in form, depending on how the researchers choose to formulate them. Some questions begin with the words "Have you...", while others open with phrases such as "How many..." or "When did you last...". This variation leads to discrepancies in the twelve-month readership index, even in the case of data collected as part of a single survey.

In the key year of 2012, when three such surveys were conducted in Poland, the difference between the findings by CBOS and the National Library amounted to nearly 20 percent, with CBOS reporting that 41 percent of Poles were non-readers and the National Library placing the number of non-readers at 60.8 percent of the population. Recall that another source mentioned above, the World Internet Project, determined that same year that 29 percent were non-readers.

Therefore, the only thing we can ascertain based on quantitative studies conducted in Poland is that they lack a generally-accepted methodology that would provide unambiguous results. It thus makes more sense to consider the phenomena of readership and non-readership by applying certain ranges and examining them as a part of exploratory projects. In such circumstances, the very issue of readership and its opposite, non-readership, is difficult to define satisfactorily.

I intend to use this subversively presented background (non-readership rather than readership, in the years 1988–2012, with particular emphasis on 2012) to sketch the remainder of this essay, in which I will discuss readership among students.

### **Methodology**

Pollsters conducted the study in question in June 2013, at several departments formally belonging to three institutions of higher learning in a major Polish city: one public and two private. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic and promises made to the governing bodies of the universities, nothing more can be said about the city chosen for the study. The survey was conducted on a sample of students of law and those departments that correspond to what our English-speaking partners refer to as "cultural studies" and "media studies," which also includes journalism and related fields. The purpose of these choices was to provide a diverse sample, not to compare results among students majoring in different subjects.

Table 1. Readership in Poland as measured by CAPI (computer-assisted personal interviews) conducted in the homes of the respondents in 2012–2013 and in January 2014, presented in chronological order. (Own work)

| Date conducted                                    | Research project name   | Commissioned by  | Fieldwork conducted by                                   | Sample size | Target population | Sampling method            | Percentage of people who had read at least one book in the past 12 months | Question posed  | Question context  |
|---|---|--|--|-------------|-------------------|----------------------------|---|---|---|
| January 2012 (5–11.01.2012)                       | Aktualne problemy i wydarzenia [Current Problems and Events]  | CBOS (Own survey)  | CBOS   | 1,058       | Age 18+           | Random (PESEL-based)       | 57%   | "Have you read a book for pleasure in the past year?"   | Events of the past year   |
| April and May 2012 (16.04–20.05.2012)             | World Internet Project  | Agora & TP (Orange)  | Ipsos  | 2,007       | Age 15–75         | Stratified random sampling | 71%   | "How many books do you read per year, on average?"  | Media consumption   |
| November 2012 (specific survey dates unavailable) | Stan czytelnictwa w Polsce [The State of Readership in Poland]  | National Library   | TNS Polska   | 3,000       | Age 15+           | Random (PESEL-based)       | 39%   | No data   | "Omnibus" omnibus survey (a syndicated study in which many clients pose questions and respondents provide answers during a single interview, using a questionnaire comprising separate sections covering separate issues) |
| January 2013 (3–9.01.2013)                        | Aktualne problemy i wydarzenia [Current Problems and Events]  | CBOS (Own survey)  | CBOS   | 1,227       | Age 18+           | Random (PESEL-based)       | 59%   | "Have you read a book for pleasure in the past year?"   | Feelings and opinions on the events of the past year  |
| October and November 2013 (29.10–26.11.2013)      | Kierunki i formy transformacji czytelnictwa w Polsce [The Transformation of Readership in Poland: Trends and Forms] | Observatory of Culture program, Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, with funding from the Polish Chamber of Books | CBOS, using a questionnaire designed by OPI PIB and CBOS | 2,031       | Age 15+           | Random (PESEL-based)       | 62%<br><br>69%  | "When did you last read a book for pleasure?"<br><br>"How many paper books have you read from start to finish (or almost completed) in the past 12 months?" | Media consumption   |
| January 2014 (9–15.01.2014)                       | Aktualne problemy i wydarzenia [Current Problems and Events]  | CBOS (Own survey)  | Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej                          | 1,067       | Age 18+           | Random (PESEL-based)       | 59%   | "Have you read a book for pleasure in the past year?"   | Feelings and opinions on the events of the past year  |

The survey was conducted through the auditorium method, with responses provided by students of various years. The questionnaire was thus filled out by fourth and fifth year students, though the international goal was to reach undergraduates and students of parallel years (i.e., people who had not yet earned a Bachelor's degree and first to third year students). Subsequent international analyses will thus take into account 648 out of a total 760 submitted questionnaires (part of which are incomplete due, for example, to a refusal to respond, or inattentiveness or lack of motivation on the part of the respondent; the analyses presented below are based on 745 questionnaires and the percentages cited are calculated based on this number).

The survey discussed below was conducted through the collection of questionnaire data, that is, data of a quantitative nature. Regardless of this fact, due mainly to the non-representative nature of the selected sample, the results should generally be analyzed in an exploratory fashion and should lead to the posing of questions that warrant further examination. Possible future studies could involve testing hypotheses on yet-unavailable representative samples that reflect the general population of students of a given major or year. Earl Babbie goes as far as to recommend the "qualitative analysis of quantitative data,"<sup>9</sup> which suggests that the insight achieved from quantitative data can be of value even when we do not apply to it the instruments of statistical analysis. The analytical approach proposed herein lies within the boundaries of the sociology of literature, though it also allows us to reconstruct unconscious motivations, ones that are difficult to articulate, and to avoid the trap of self-presentation mentioned by Maciej Maryl,<sup>10</sup> citing the authors of the sociological work *Problematyka kształtowania się potrzeb czytelniczych [Reader Needs and Their Development]*.<sup>11</sup>

One unquestionable limitation of the survey was its use of an international questionnaire that will someday allow an international team to compare the results from Poland with those collected in other countries, which will likely be analyzed in other articles in the upcoming years.<sup>12</sup> The questionnaire, while

9 Earl Babbie, *The Basics of Social Research* (Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2008), 438.

10 Maciej Maryl, "Antropologia odbioru literatury – zagadnienia metodologiczne," *Teksty Drugie* 1/2 (2009).

11 Elżbieta Wnuk-Lipińska and Edmund Wnuk-Lipiński, *Problematyka kształtowania się potrzeb czytelniczych, Biblioteka Narodowa* (Warszawa: Biblioteka Narodowa, 1975).

12 The international survey was conducted by a team supervised by Dr. Joe Karaganis of Columbia University. In Poland the project was implemented by a team that communicated with international coordinators and adapted the provided research tools (2012–2013): Dr. Mirosław Filiciak, Dr. Alek Tarkowski, Dr. Piotr Toczycki, in cooperation with Michał Kotnarowski, who conducted the statistical analyses (2013), as well Łukasz Anders, M.A., and Maciej Sopyłko, M.A., who worked in tandem to conduct most of the survey fieldwork.

extensive, did not permit the researchers to examine in greater detail every topic of interest, and thus limited the scope of their exploration.

### **Respondents and Their Convenience of Access to Texts**

For the purposes of this article, I will examine the entire sample of 760 responses, including those which were incomplete that is a total of 745 typically, with the caveat that the results of a survey conducted in this manner apply only to this group of students, which is not representative of the Polish student body nor even the student population in the city in which the study was conducted.

The collected data will at this point be presented in a manner that reflects individual fields of study: imagine the respondents as a rather numerous yet arbitrarily (but, importantly, not randomly) selected academic community, one comprising young liberal arts majors studying in the second decade of our century that is digital natives. Anyone attending university in 2013 has spent most of his or her life with access to multimedia text. Such students escape traditional descriptions that were once applied to the process of studying at university. It appears that the convenience with which students access academic content was completely disregarded in typical descriptions of studying, the didactic process, and self-education. Meanwhile, from today's perspective, the omission of the subject of access in discussions on readership, particularly among students, seems significant. In the results presented below, the main subject of focus is precisely the practices associated with accessing required textual content.

While this approach is realized through the questionnaire method, it is essentially an application of the "turn to the recipient in the field of media studies and audience ethnography," cited by Maciej Maryl, a turn that postulates that we pay attention to the "biographically determined individual who reads texts in accordance with his or her own practical interests."<sup>13</sup>

The survey illustrates the way in which technological developments affect practices associated with access, rather than reading as such, within the field of education; in other words, the manner in which textual content is accessed. It is common knowledge that the Internet and the device through which it is accessed have changed the way in which people study. To better depict this obvious fact, let us listen to one critical voice in academia concerning not the dismal state of readership today, but the obstacles that once made academic content difficult to access. The surveyed students filled out their questionnaires at a moment that coincided with an interesting polemic between two

13 Maciej Maryl, "Literatura i e-społeczeństwo," *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2012).



university professors in the media. Arkadiusz Stempin, responding to Jan Hartman's claims regarding the supposed "idiotization" of universities, observed in a piece published on the news site Tokfm.pl on May 14, 2013, that not only was the potential availability of academic material greater today than thirty years before, so was its potential usability. "I remember being required to read '50 pages per day' when attending the renowned Jagiellonian University. That was pure fiction. It was not just that we were lazy: we did not read that much because we did not have anything to read. There were no books, no photocopiers, no printers," he wrote.<sup>14</sup>

The results collected in the survey expand on this notion of books, photocopiers, and printers as contemporary attributes of the successful student. The change that occurred went by almost unnoticed. Meanwhile, these results allow us to examine the process of studying from the point of view of the convenience of the audience for which academic literature is published. Furthermore, this is likely the only perspective that enables us to understand most of the results presented below and to assemble them into a cohesive image.

The perspective of user experience management, a topic well known to large online publishers (or should we say broadcasters?), involves discussing informal access to content based on an existing empathetic understanding of the users – backed by studies or accurate intuition – and accepting their world. The potential reader is frustrated by the subjective cost associated with accessing content, just as the Internet user is frustrated by the need to go through one extra click or one extra page load, or even waiting a few seconds for a page to load.<sup>15</sup> This perspective brings us to three conclusions that can be formulated based on the results of the auditorium questionnaires mentioned above.

### **First Conclusion: Students Purchase Books when Photocopies or Electronic Versions are Unavailable.**

87.2 percent of students have at some point purchased new study materials. The following table presents the number of respondents who provided particular reasons for purchasing materials, discussed below from the user convenience perspective.

<sup>14</sup> Arkadiusz Stempin, "O zbaraniu uczelni, czyli jak prof. Hartman zerkał na pomalowane paznokcie studentek [POLEMIKA]," accessed March 27, 2014, [http://www.tokfm.pl/Tokfm/1,102433,13906492,O\\_zbaraniu\\_uczelni\\_\\_\\_czyli\\_jak\\_prof\\_\\_\\_Hartman\\_zerka.html](http://www.tokfm.pl/Tokfm/1,102433,13906492,O_zbaraniu_uczelni___czyli_jak_prof___Hartman_zerka.html)

<sup>15</sup> Piotr Toczyński, "Aktywni internauci – perspektywa zarządzania doświadczeniem," in *Obiegi kultury. Społeczna cyrkulacja treści*, ed. Mirosław Filiciał, Justyna Hofmokl, Alek Tarkowski (Warszawa: Centrum Cyfrowe, 2012).

Table 2. Reasons for purchasing new study materials (the number of respondents who provided a given answer to the question "Why do you buy new materials?" multiple responses were permitted).

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Copies, used books, or library copies are unavailable or difficult to access | 144 |
| I want to own a current edition of a given title                             | 142 |
| I'm interested in the content of a given book or need extended access to it  | 128 |
| I want to own a new copy of the book   | 79  |
| Convenience  | 58  |
| Low price of new books or photocopying is not worth the cost                 | 27  |
| The textbook contains exercises to fill out                                  | 13  |
| I want to take notes in the book   | 12  |
| I respect copyright  | 8   |
| I believe in supporting the publishers and authors                           | 7   |
| Other reason   | 41  |
| Other answer   | 27  |

While 58 respondents in this group do claim to buy new materials due to their "convenience," the remaining responses also indicate that convenience could be a reason for purchasing new study materials.

For instance, 144 respondents claim that they only buy new materials when it is difficult or impossible to access copies, used books, or library books. A comparable number of respondents, 128, claim to buy new books when they need to use the contents of a given book for an extended time or if they simply find it interesting. The purchase of new books is driven by convenience combined with thriftiness, where thriftiness can sometimes be an obstacle to full convenience. Such motivations as the desire to support the publishers or authors, a stated respect for copyright, or the option of taking notes on the pages of a new book are marginal.

Another reason to buy new materials marked in the questionnaire is simply "to own a new copy of the book" (79 respondents), which can be interpreted as a similar reason to "convenience." Such a comparison must come with the caveat that while owning a personal copy of a book required for a student's coursework is not necessarily synonymous with convenience, it can certainly spare him or her trips to the library and allows them to mark up the books. In an article sketching the scope of the change that occurred in the distribution of text, a piece foreshadowing this study, Mirosław Filićiak discussed a reading model that "legitimized market practices," one in which a person reads "the entire book, using an original copy – preferably one

personally owned by the reader, a copy with which he or she has an emotional attachment."<sup>16</sup> Such notions of the book held by modern-day publishers – if they do, in fact, reflect their actual notions – seem idealized, particularly with regard to materials used by students today. Even the literature of the subject is guilty of fetishizing books in an age of multimedia: Alessandra Pozzi even observes that it is in the context of the dominance of multimedia texts that traditional books acquire a particular totemic power.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, from the perspective of the student and book owner's convenience, the ownership of a book seems to be more closely associated with the experience of a convenient tool than the experience of a situation that is almost sacred in nature. This is not to downplay the topic of the book as a relic or object, which deserves to be examined separately; unfortunately, this exceeds the scope of the collected data.

The list of reasons for purchasing books presented in the table above reflects a desire for convenience, yet it is a desire that is limited by available resources. Only twenty-seven respondents chose the statement that combines the "low price of new books" and that "photocopying is not worth the cost," which indicates that they generally consider the price of books to be high and view photocopying as an economically viable option.

Photocopying books is itself inconvenient, although the opposite is likely true of a paper copy that one can mark up. Over half (61.4 percent) of respondents stated that they copy less than 20 percent of the materials required for their coursework from other students, if anything at all. At the same time, among the sources of texts listed by students, not one was mentioned more frequently than the filesharing website Chomikuj.pl, which was selected 506 times (as an "illegal" source) and 39 times (as a "legal" one). The legal classification was chosen by the respondents themselves.

The high percentage of students who use a single website that dominates the digital landscape and offers immediate access to academic content can also be interpreted within the assumed perspective as an expression of the users' desire for convenience. The second most frequently mentioned website, Rapidshare.pl, with 91 students listing it as an "illegal" source, also offers online access to content without requiring the user to install any additional software.

The presence of both sites in the results reinforces the interpretation of the data as an illustration of the users' desire for convenience. This is particularly

16 Mirosław Filiciak, "Tekst jako plik. Techno-społeczne wymiary czytania na przykładzie przemian procesów dystrybucji tekstów," *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2012).

17 Alessandra Pozzi, "Reflections on the Meaning of the Book, Beginning with its Physicality: Instrument or Fetish?," *Italian Sociological Review* 1–2 (2011).

true in light of the stated reasons for using these websites: these include convenient access (mentioned by 43.6 percent of users), free or cheap access (26.8 percent), saving time and quick access (25.9 percent).

The results also indicate the respondents' perceived lack of a "legal" alternative (19.7 percent mention the "lack of access to legal sources") and, at the same time, the lack of a general conviction that the listed sites contain "a large quantity of useful material" (14.2 percent).

### **Second Conclusion: Academic Books Belong Among Online Multimedia Resources**

Users are also familiar with the leading filesharing websites Rapidshare and Chomikuj in a non-academic context: for example, 58 percent of respondents claim to download music from "sites such as" the two mentioned, while 47.2 percent use them as a source of films and television programs. Other sites, including commercial and peer-to-peer services, are much lower on the list of providers mentioned by the students (iTunes, for example, is used for downloading music by 22.6 percent of respondents, while 11.9 percent of them use it to download films).

In response to this state of content consumption, the professors of 28.1 percent of respondents used "sites such as" Rapidshare and Chomikuj.pl to share materials with their students. This is comparable with the percentage of respondents who mentioned the use of Google Docs and Scribd (27 percent), but much lower than e-mail (64.3 percent of respondents, compared to 66.6 percent of respondents stating that their teachers used any of the listed means to share content). 17.2 percent of students reported that their professors used Facebook to share materials with students, while 11 percent did so using blogging platforms. Dedicated internal "virtual university" systems were mentioned by a negligible percentage of respondents (9.8 percent; it can be assumed that these responses pertained to the posting of course syllabuses on such sites). It is noteworthy, however, that 31 percent of respondents listed the filesharing system Dropbox as a method used by their professors.

However, when students share academic content among themselves, they most frequently use mailing lists or shared e-mail accounts (197 mentions among a total of 537) as well as social network groups (156 mentions among a total of 537). 59.1 percent of respondents stated that students had the implied permission of their professors to share course materials among themselves. Among the tools listed were e-mail (59.7 percent), platforms such as Dropbox and Chomikuj.pl (33.3 percent), and offline tools such as "hard drives and flash drives" (21.2 percent). These tools were also familiar

to respondents as ways of sharing music (28.7 percent) and movies (20.7 percent).

In order to understand the circulation of multimedia content online, it is helpful to “suspend one’s moral judgment,”<sup>18</sup> which also facilitates describing the results from the perspective of convenience. When asked to provide the reasons for using sites that they themselves perceived to be “illegal” – a question listed on the international questionnaire – the respondents typically mentioned ease of use, free-of-charge access, and the broad range of content provided. This confirms the previously observed tendency on the part of the respondents to opt for convenience.

Table 3. Reasons for using sites containing course materials (the number of respondents who provided a given answer to the question “Why do you use them [online sources that you consider to be illegal]?”; multiple responses were permitted).

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Ease of access                                | 239 |
| Free or low-cost access                       | 147 |
| To save time; quick access                    | 142 |
| Lack of access to legal sources               | 108 |
| Large amount of useful material               | 78  |
| They contain content posted by my professors  | 8   |
| I want to have the text in electronic form    | 8   |
| They contain content posted by other students | 5   |

### **Third Conclusion: Academic Books are Read “Here and Now,” Not Stored on a Bookshelf (Real or Virtual)**

From our assumed perspective, the lack of an inclination to collect books should be associated with the involved lack of convenience. 25.1 percent of respondents owned their own personal library of digital books, while 73.6 percent explicitly claimed not to own such a library. When the question is modified, we learn that 47.8 percent of respondents own PDF files of academic articles or results of studies, while just over half of the respondents do not. One out of three respondents who own a collection of PDF files has ten or fewer, while slightly more than half have twenty or fewer (53.7 percent). Amassing larger collections thus appears to be an activity that limits the person’s comfort.

<sup>18</sup> Filiciak, “Tekst jako plik.”

72.2 percent of respondents are able to find the materials required for their courses at a library, while 50.2 percent feel that their access to class materials is practically guaranteed by their library. 51 percent occasionally borrow books from their university libraries, and a somewhat smaller percentage (47.4 percent) sometimes find the books required for their studies at other libraries. However, 41.2 percent of respondents locate most of the materials they need for classes online: these respondents state that six out of ten information queries they make for university courses are done on the Internet. 34.1 percent claim the same of six, seven or eight out of ten pieces of information, while 7.1 percent do so with regard to all of the information they need.

This is confirmed in the question regarding the use of online text databases when studying or completing assignments for classes: 54.4 percent claim to use such databases. Upon closer examination of the results, it appears that respondents understand such databases to include, in particular, Wikipedia (17.4 percent), materials located through Google (14.5 percent), and Chomikuj.pl (13.5 percent). The list also includes Facebook (2.1 percent). Local language versions of global online communication and information tools, together with local user-made repositories, appear to be convenient ways of accessing content, likely because users are already familiar with them from non-academic contexts. The list also includes specialized databases that are typical for particular university majors, especially legal databases. 37.9 percent of respondents confirm that the availability of digital materials has changed their reading practices, but must have observed no such change (43.4 percent). It can be supposed that this is a result of the fact that students belonging to the surveyed age groups have grown up in a digital environment and have no memory of an entirely "analog" world. When probed with an additional question, only 8.6 percent of respondents state they read less now than they did before.

Interestingly, and somewhat counterintuitively, given the popular beliefs regarding technologization, students appear to find reading on paper more convenient. This is the way in which 78.4 percent of respondents typically read, while fewer of them, 22.7 percent, read text mainly on computer screens (though some respondents listed both as their preferred medium). When asked how they usually read, and given the option of providing multiple answers, respondents say that they prefer paper, and list computer screens as the second most popular choice. Third on the list are other, mobile, screens: mobile devices (tablets, e-book readers, and mobile phone screens, each treated separately) were at the time of the study much less popular as a means of accessing academic materials.

This paper-digital image is therefore not unambiguous. Different means of access intertwine, and a given text's absence from the Internet does not

preclude attempts to locate it via other methods, for example by the traditional academic route of visiting the library. 73.2 percent of respondents claim that they can “usually find course materials at the library,” while even more, 79.1 percent, sometimes borrow books from the university library. 63 percent of respondents use libraries other than the ones at their university. In that case, what part of their “search for texts or information required for their courses” do they do online? 62.5 percent of respondents claim that they find information they search for on the Internet in four out of ten cases. It would thus be incorrect to state that content will not be read if it can be found in the library, but not online. One might even consider whether the paper “interface” is simply a convenient interface for accessing content, and if it happens to be unavailable, prohibitively expensive, or inconvenient to access due to various factors that were not explored in the survey, this is compensated by more convenient access channels.

Examining the issue in this manner enables us to combine the aforementioned perspectives of the book as an “instrument” and as a “totemic” object. Both motivations can intertwine, and the more utilitarian one can stem from the inability to freely realize more the more fundamental motivation.

## Conclusion

The data presented above illustrate the everyday practices of students and their notions of studying in an era of ubiquitous and new (is it still new?) interactive technology. While quantitative, the data has been analyzed with the goal of achieving at least some degree of qualitative insight. They have not been examined critically from an elitist point of view, but have been discussed from the perspective of convenience of access, user convenience, and what we might describe as “user experience management” for the reader, without rejecting more important topics, few of which fell within the scope of this study.

The quantitative data illustrate the crucial role played by seemingly secondary factors in driving academic readership among students. Content delivery methods built and developed with other multimedia content in mind and with the goal of maximizing reader convenience are particularly informative in the search for areas of readership growth. This information applies at least to the group studied through the questionnaire, though, as I mentioned at the beginning, we do not know what population it represents. The preferred paper form is nevertheless giving way to other access methods, thus demonstrating their potential.

The above results and the accompanying conclusions regarding the state of “the study of non-reading” is therefore largely practical in nature. The

combination of basic and applied research with international academic initiatives – reflected in the subject of study – should result in a redefinition of the current way of thinking about studying, the academic community, and the liberal arts. Examining these subjects by applying different categories does not necessarily entail a lack of critical thinking, but it should also be based in data acquired through questionnaire surveys, for example, as was the case with the presented study. In an era of online file-sharing and the desire for convenient access to text, driven by the development of the technology that allows users to copy and share content, traditional academic readership is simply undergoing a transformation, one that nevertheless gives text a new opportunity to influence the reader.

*Translation: Arthur Barys*