

Digital Books in Polish Public Libraries: Case Study of Partnership with the Commercial Distributor Legimi

This article outlines a case study of the partnership between Polish public libraries and Legimi, a commercial distributor of digital books operating on both the trade book and library markets. Legimi and representatives of the libraries were interviewed in order to examine the reasons why libraries contract with commercial actors, the extent to which these services are used, the rationale for selecting the billing models, and which funding sources support libraries in this regard. Arrangements for Legimi's services are negotiated mainly through library consortia. Currently, approximately 42% of all libraries in Poland provide digital books through Legimi.

Keywords: Polish public libraries; digital books; e-lending; partnership; Legimi

Introduction

Books in digital formats (ebooks and audiobooks) have become a natural part of public libraries' services in many countries in recent decades. Libraries' provision of ebooks and audiobooks may be seen as a manifestation of their ambition to provide access to information and culture in a novel way, but also to follow societal and technological advancements. Moreover, because the number of copies of printed books that public libraries can purchase is limited by strained library budgets, libraries choose to provide services for digital books, especially the titles in high demand (Bergström et al. 2017). In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic forced many libraries to search for new ways of providing books to their users when access to many public services and institutions was limited or unavailable (McMenemy, Robinson and Ruthven 2023; Parikh, Vyas and Parikh 2020). Finally, digital books are also a novel way to promote literature and reach out to new user groups, including low-income or print-disabled patrons, as problematized by Jones (2021).

The digitality of the book format implies the so-called "end of ownership" since libraries no longer own digital books in a legal sense, but instead mediate access to them. They therefore need to relate to market forces, that is, the business strategies and policies of the publishers, which are sometimes restrictive (Giblin and Weatherall 2015; Perzanowski and Schultz 2016; Sang 2017).

There are different ways for public libraries to make digital books available to users, predominantly through various licensing models supported by aggregators, as in the United States and many European countries (EBLIDA 2023; Liguzinski 2023; Whitney and De Castell 2017). Many types of e-lending models are in use, for example a library can purchase a time or checkout-limited license that lends out the titles by the principle of one copy/one user or, a pay-per-circulation license that requires retroactive payment for every checkout, which secures good availability of the book but may generate costs. These e-lending solutions have often been a source of controversy and conflict between the publishing houses, who are the rightsholders, and public libraries. Relationships

between these two groups of actors have often been antagonist and strained, as in the case of Denmark's e-lending library service, eReolen (Worsøe-Schmidt 2019), or of the United States, where the major publishers challenge the provision of digital books to American public libraries through their restrictive lending policies (Jones 2021; Sisto 2022). Recently in the USA, there have been attempts in several states to guarantee ebook provision to libraries by means of state law (Minow and Courtney 2022). Furthermore, many libraries in the USA use Controlled Digital Lending, which means that the library lends out their users a digitized copy of a lawfully acquired paper book according to the one copy/one user principle (De Castell et al. 2022; Hansen and Courtney 2023; Pang 2023). However, this practice has led to controversies, as the major American publishers brought a lawsuit against Internet Archive because of its Controlled Digital Lending practices during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mrva-Montoya 2023; Wang and Lipinski 2023).

In most cases, libraries do not have the infrastructure to provide access to digital books, such as servers and software, which make them dependent on the technical solutions delivered by aggregators or distributors, as noted by Giblin et al. (2019a) in the case of five major English-language countries and by Bergström et al. (2017) in Sweden. However, little is known about the situation when public libraries partner with a distributor, which does not simply pass on the licensing terms decided by the publishers (as the global vendor Overdrive does with institutional clients), but is also a major player in the trade book market, providing subscription-based streaming services to individual users.

In Poland, there is no central library actor who supports access to trade ebooks and audiobooks in public libraries, such as a national library (as in the Netherlands) or an association of libraries/librarians (as in Denmark) (EBLIDA 2023). Also, licensing models operating by the one copy/one user principle or metered access, for example, are not common. Instead, Polish public libraries sign deals with commercial actors that provide access to digital books through their platforms. One such actor is Legimi, a major Polish ebook distributor operating primarily on the commercial market, and not the library market. The following study aims to explore the partnership between Polish public libraries and Legimi by describing and problematizing how the relationship with the commercial distributor affects the Polish public library sector. We pay special attention to the organizational and financial aspects, as well as consumption patterns. The relationship between public libraries and commercial ebook distributors has not been studied internationally, nor has the subject of digital books in Polish public libraries been included in international e-lending overviews, such as the report prepared by Whitney and De Castell for the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) (Whitney and De Castell 2017) or EBLIDA's *Handbook on Comparative E-Lending Policies in European Public Libraries* (2023).

The article aims to illustrate an alternative solution to well-established e-lending models, in which libraries develop their own digital collections by purchasing/licensing directly

from publishers or vendors like Overdrive, which serves only institutions. Shedding light on Legimi's operations in Poland can help library professionals, policy makers, and library and information science (LIS) scholars gain a better understanding of the challenges public libraries face when providing access to digital books.

Background

In order to provide context for the further analysis of Legimi, this section introduces the current trends and dynamics in the Polish digital book market, briefly describes the Polish library sector, reviews the literature, and finally introduces Legimi as a commercial distributor for digital books.

Digital book market in Poland

The revenue generated by the book publishing industry in Poland was estimated to reach 883.08 million USD in 2023, down from 1,255.9 million USD in 2012 (Statista 2021, 4-5). In the yearly Polish Book Market reports, more detailed data illustrates that, after an extended period of decline between 2014 and 2018, income from book sales at publisher's market prices began to increase gradually in 2019 (Table 1). Furthermore, despite the overall market challenges, sales of ebooks and audiobooks have demonstrated consistent growth (Table 2). Their share of the total market value also increased between 2018 and 2021, from 4% to 7% for audiobooks and from 4% to nearly 12% for ebooks (Table 3).

Table 1. Income from book sales at publisher's market prices in Poland (in PLN mln)

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Income in PLN mln	2,670	2,680	2,480	2,410	2,370	2,320	2,250	2,340	2,550	3,009
Income in EUR mln	639	640	582	566	559	528	523	532	553	638

Source: Polish Book Market 2018–2022

Table 2. Value of digital book sales in retail prices in Poland (in PLN mln)

	2018	2019	2020	2021
Ebooks	102,5	163,8	216	345
Audiobooks	59,0	81,0	153	no data

Source: Polish Book Market 2018–2022

Table 3. Digital book sales' share of the total market value

	2018	2019	2020	2021
Ebooks	4-5%	7%	8,5%	11,5%
Audiobooks	–	4%	6,0%	7,0%

Source: Polish Book Market 2018–2022

The number of ebook users increased from 2.6 million (2017) to 3.1 million (2023) and, according to the Statista Digital Market Outlook (as quoted in Statista 2021, 28), it is expected to remain at this level until 2026 (Statista 2021, 28). In the context of the growing digital publishing market, it is not surprising that libraries are expanding their offerings to include access to digital publications.

The partnership between public libraries and commercial distributors should also be seen in a broader context, particularly in light of the growing popularity of streaming services for books in many countries, as noted by John B. Thompson (2021). Such trends are also

visible in Poland, as there are numerous ebook and audiobook distributors operating on the Polish market. Audioteka, founded in 2008, was the first streaming service for digital books. It offers subscriptions and à la carte options (Audioteka 2023). Four years later, Legimi began offering a subscription service (Legimi 2023a). Since that time, large Swedish streaming services that have been operating successfully internationally have also entered the Polish market to compete with Legimi and Audioteka: Storytel in 2016 and BookBeat in 2020 (BookBeat 2023).

It is also worth noting that the streaming services Spotify (in 2013) and Netflix (in 2016) were launched in Poland, drawing public attention (Szostak 2022). Access to unlimited music and film content in a subscription model had an impact on media consumption habits. These habits changed even further in response to the COVID-19 pandemic with streaming books becoming more prevalent in Poland (Dymmel 2021, 765). As the Polish Book Market report states, “there was a dynamic change in 2020, with more and more Poles using subscriptions for digital books” (2021, 12). From 2019 to 2020, the number of Legimi’s users (including library users) increased significantly (from 69,462 to 120,396), with 85,702 individual users (66% more than in 2019) and 34,694 library and B2B users (Dymmel 2021, 755; “Wzrost liczby abonentów”, 2021).

Those changes also influenced the emergence of new subscription offerings designed specifically for public libraries. Since July 2021, Empik, the largest bookstore chain in Poland and one of the largest e-commerce platforms, has been providing libraries with access to digital books (Cyfranek 2021). Since around 2022, Audioteka has offered services dedicated to libraries as well.

Polish public library sector

Public libraries constitute the largest group of libraries in Poland, where more than 37 million people live (GUS 2023). According to Statistics Poland, by 2021 there were 2,615 public libraries with 5,078 branches. They operate according to the Polish Law on Libraries (Ustawa o bibliotekach – see Rzeczpospolita Polska. Sejm 1997) and are supervised by local government units. The law states that their main task is to develop and satisfy the general public’s educational, cultural, and informational needs and to disseminate knowledge and culture. Libraries carry out these tasks by collecting, developing, and providing access to library collections in various forms and arranging different types of cultural events, among other activities. Polish public libraries function as independent organizations or as part of larger local cultural institutions, most commonly as part of a center for culture, sports, and recreation.

A particular type of public library in Poland is the regional (provincial) library, which functions as an information center in addition to having its own book collection. It is also obliged by law to provide other libraries with instructional and methodological assistance and training, as well as to supervise the execution of the tasks assigned to district and municipal (commune) libraries concerning for example cooperation between libraries in cataloging, acquisition and circulation of library materials (Budyńska and Jeziarska 2017;

Rzeczpospolita Polska. Sejm 1997).

For many years, Polish public libraries have been making available a variety of licensed resources, including educational, scientific, and professional materials. Since 2008, the platform Ibuk Libra of Scientific Publishers PWN has acted as an online reading room; since 2014 the Ebookpoint Biblio of Helion Publishing House and Academica terminals, which operates as a system of interlibrary loans for scholarly publications, has done the same (Academica 2023; Biblio 2023; Ibuk Libra 2023). General-sector digital books are available on compact discs and can also be borrowed from the library on e-readers (Czytio.pl 2014; Morawiec 2014). In 2015, Legimi began offering access to general digital books through libraries. Other distributors, Ibuk Libra and Ebookpoint Biblio, began providing trade books shortly thereafter: in 2017 and 2020, respectively (Ibuk Libra 2023; SBP 2023).

Reports published by the Polish Librarians' Association in collaboration with the Directors of Regional Public Libraries and the Conference of Directors of Polish Academic Schools Libraries reveal that out of the 2,508 main public libraries analyzed, 28.79% in 2020 and 42.34% in 2021 offered remote access to licensed resources (Jeziarska 2020, 6; 2021, 13). According to data collected by Statistics Poland, in 2021, 37% of all public library systems offered their users access to licensed electronic resources (Table 4), 31.9% offered the possibility to remotely use copyrighted ebooks, and 19.7% offered remote access to audiobooks (GUS 2022b, 103). Those libraries provided access to over 11 million ebooks, almost 70,500 e-journals, and 109 databases (Morawiec 2022).

Table 4. Number of public libraries in Poland from 2018 to 2022.

Year	Number of public libraries (with branches)	Remote access to digital books, e-journals and databases	Percentage of public libraries with remote access to digital books
2018	7,925	no data	no data
2019	7,881	2,011	26%
2020	7,782	2,343	30%
2021	7,693	2,824	37%
2022	7,638	no data	no data

Source: (based on data provided by Statistics Poland [*GUS 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022a*], compiled by the authors)

As presented in Table 4, the number of public libraries in Poland has slightly declined in recent years. However, the number of libraries providing remote access to digital books, e-journals, and e-databases has been increasing since 2019. This data is confirmed in the Polish Book Market 2022 report: “In Poland, the distribution of ebooks via subscription models (e.g., Legimi, Empik, or Ebookpoint) to institutional customers, above all public libraries, is also gradually but consistently growing” (2022: 11).

Over the past few years, Polish scholarly journals have published many articles about ebooks and their history, structure, distribution, and terms of use, as well as legal issues related to them (Augustyn 2017; Biga 2016; Kasperek 2015; Kurek-Kokocińska 2020;

Nizianty and Piechota 2016). These publications focus on the media landscape, paying particular attention to the ebook itself as a product or service. Articles written by journalists and tech bloggers also provide helpful information about platforms, services, and the features of products offered by various entities on the Polish ebook market (Świat Czytników, Cyfranek, Sporyszkiewicz).

The first analysis of the e-services available in Polish libraries was conducted by Agnieszka Łakomy-Chłosta (2017). However, she examined almost exclusively those types of e-loans imitating the analogue solutions when a digitally lent book becomes unavailable to other users until its automatic return, such as in the case of the platforms Ibuk Libra, Bez Kartek, and Academica. Teresa Święćkowska examined the provision of digital books in Polish public libraries in light of the legal, organizational, and technological changes in other countries in a pilot study (2022). Several studies have also analyzed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the interest in remote access to digital books in specific regions or libraries (Chapska 2021; Kukla-Rycąbel 2022; Miękus and Ostoja-Helczyńska 2022; Ronkiewicz-Braziel and Knapik-Lizak 2021; Święćkowska 2022). However, a more comprehensive analysis of how libraries provide access to digital books and how this affects their activity is missing.

Legimi as an ebook distributor

Legimi is a Polish ebook and audiobook trade distributor, created as a start-up in 2009 and operating as both a subscription-based streaming platform and a printed book trader since 2012. Since 2021, it has been listed on the New Connect Stock Exchange, owned by the Warsaw Stock Exchange. Currently, Legimi is present on the Polish and German markets. According to their reports and press material, the company now offers about 180,000 book titles in a subscription model for both individual and institutional customers (including libraries and commercial companies) in Poland and Germany. It is used by 230,000 users in total (Legimi 2023b). Legimi offers access to ebooks, audiobooks, and so-called synchrobooks, a format that allows users to switch seamlessly between ebook and audiobook versions – in some cases automatically generated ones – of the same title.

Legimi's catalog includes books from over 800 publishers (Legimi 2023b). Daily, 60,000–70,000 users access digital books via the Legimi app (according to a Legimi representative). It has been installed on five million smartphones; additionally, the company has sold over 17,000 e-readers to Polish customers (Legimi 2023b).

Methodology

Our case study is of Legimi, which has been working with Polish public libraries for the longest period (since 2015) of all distributors that provide access to digital books in the trade sector. Therefore, a more detailed analysis of their partnership with libraries can be provided.

The four main research questions we addressed were as follows:

- (1) How many Polish public libraries have partnered with Legimi?

- (2) What are the main reasons for public libraries to partner with commercial actors such as Legimi?
- (3) How have public libraries financed their access to Legimi's services?
- (4) How has the relationship with Legimi affected the public libraries?

Before we began collecting data, we knew that the Polish libraries were forming regional consortia to provide access to Legimi. However, we were unable to determine their number and composition based on online sources. This study uses data collected in interviews with library representatives and data retrieved from Legimi's database and provided by a Legimi representative.

Semi-structured interviews and email correspondence with the representatives of the libraries serving as regional consortium leaders were conducted to gather information about Polish public libraries partnering with Legimi. We talked with the libraries' directors or the librarians responsible for library development or collection management. Our research did not include the libraries that, for some reason, did not partner with Legimi through regional consortia and therefore contracted with the company independently.¹ However, it should be noted that some libraries that are consortia members had tested Legimi before deciding whether to create or join a consortium.

The interviews were conducted in the manner most suitable for the library representatives: either in person or by MS Teams, telephone, or email correspondence. The first message sent to the respondents included general information about the research project and an invitation to participate in the survey. In many cases, there was a need to remind the respondents about the inquiry and to complete the initial response through follow-up questions. The data collection lasted from December 2022 until the beginning of April 2023. We received responses from 14 out of 20 libraries acting as consortium leaders. Our first interview was conducted with a representative of Legimi, who is responsible for relations with libraries. The data (e.g., on the number of libraries in consortia) were corrected or supplemented by them in June 2023.

The detailed questions posed to the library representatives in the data collection process are categorized and listed below.

Organization

- (1) Why do libraries choose to incorporate subscription offerings into their services?
- (2) What criteria were used to choose the distributors which would provide access to ebooks and audiobooks in the trade/general segment?
- (3) Why was Legimi chosen to provide digital books?
- (4) Why are consortia formed?

¹ According to the Legimi representative, over 100 Polish libraries have access to Legimi through individual contracts (Legimi representative, email message, February 20, 2023a).

- (5) How many libraries in a particular region are consortium members?
- (6) How does the partnership with Legimi affect library employment?
- (7) Is there an exchange of information about the Legimi collaboration between libraries in the region and throughout the country?

Funding framework

- (1) What funding sources do libraries use to purchase Legimi access?
- (2) How much of the library's budget is spent on Legimi's service, compared to the acquisition of paper books?
- (3) Which billing model for access was chosen by the library?

Consumption

- (1) How many access codes have been issued and activated by the users?
- (2) How many books have been downloaded and opened?
- (3) How many active users does the library have?
- (4) How has remote access to library services impacted the number of library users?

During our data collection, the initial list of questions in the survey was modified and extended as new aspects of the relationship with Legimi came to light. Although the iterative approach to data collection was time-consuming, it proved to be an effective method for exploring the complexity of the issue.

Furthermore, we conducted a set of inquiries in Legimi's catalog in order to determine the number of titles available under different distribution plans for commercial and institutional users.

The data collected via interviews was supplemented by secondary sources, such as reports from Statistics Poland, Polish Book Market, the Polish Librarians' Association, and the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage.

Findings

Legimi's offering to libraries

As of 2022, the company partners with nearly 1,100 Polish public libraries, including those with individual contracts, yielding approximately 42% coverage of the public library market. Two billing models are offered to Polish public libraries by Legimi. The first one operates according to the logic of "a limited number of access codes to a database / limited time / unlimited number of pages," which means that a library offers its users, for example, 100 access codes per month. With the code, a user logs in to the Legimi platform and they can read as many books as they want during this month. A new set of codes is activated the following month. The second model can be described as "unlimited number of access codes to a database / limited time / limited number of pages per library," meaning that a library can offer a code to every user, but purchases a limited number of

book pages to be read during a given period. One code can be valid for either 30 days, 3 months, 6 months, or 12 months, whereas in most cases, Polish public libraries have a subscription for one month.

The number of titles in Legimi’s offer changes continually based on publishers’ contracts.² Therefore, on July 24 and August 13, 2023, we conducted simple inquiries to investigate the availability of titles under different distribution plans (library and commercial) on the Legimi catalog website <https://www.legimi.pl/ebooki/>. By using filters, we identified the number of titles available according to subscription type (commercial, library, and Kindle), format (ebooks and audiobooks), and language (Polish, English, German, and Ukrainian). In total, 173,917 to 177,505 titles are available through library subscriptions, while 177,853 to 181,451 are available through commercial subscriptions. Polish-language titles constitute 31% of the catalog for both types of subscription. The range of audiobooks is relatively similar in size, ranging from 12,465 (library catalog) to 13,086 (commercial catalog), of which 98% are Polish audiobooks. There is a difference of over 3,900 titles between the commercial and library catalogs, while the difference of titles in Polish is smaller (from 1,366 to 1,388). Between the first and second queries, almost 3,600 titles were added to both subscription plans (Table 5). Traditional libraries cannot offer such a wide range of titles as Legimi. According to Statistics Poland, in 2022 there were 124,370,657 volumes in public libraries, which means an average of 16,283 books per library (GUS 2023). Although there is no data on what the average number of titles in paper format is in Polish public libraries (the number of volumes is not the same as the number of titles), it is fair to say that via Legimi the library can get access to even ten times more titles in digital format than it has in its physical collection.

Table 5. Results of inquiries of Legimi’s catalog conducted on July 24 and August 13, 2023 (<https://www.legimi.pl/ebooki/>)

	Library subscription				Commercial subscription			
	24 July		13 August		24 July		13 August	
	in Polish	other languages	in Polish	other languages	in Polish	other languages	in Polish	other languages
Ebooks	49,267	119,945	50,682	122,042	50,164	122,510	51,607	124,596
Audiobooks	12,236	229,000	12,449	244,000	12,852	234,000	13,081	249,000
Titles	53,781	120,136	55,255	122,250	55,147	122,706	56,643	124,808
TOTAL		173,917		177,505		177,853		181,451

Note: Some titles are available in both forms – ebooks and audiobooks – and thus they do not always sum up to the number of titles.

² In accordance with its contract with publishers, Legimi needs to purchase a new digital copy of a title once 15 users have checked it out (or more precisely, when 15 users have read a free excerpt of the book) or one year after the first checkout (according to a Legimi representative, personal interview conducted through the MS Teams platform, February 8, 2023).

Organization

Reasons to expand library offerings with a subscription-based service

Our interviewees pointed out that libraries decide to include ebooks and audiobooks through subscriptions due to the increasing needs of their users in this regard. The use of digital content in information societies is growing every year. This trend accelerated sharply during the COVID-19 pandemic. As libraries become aware of their users' changing expectations and needs, they expand their services. For our respondents, the main reasons were as follows:

- Collection development – Services such as Legimi add new/different titles to the library's collection; therefore, the diversity of titles is larger than in the collection of printed books.
- Responding to users' needs – Services such as Legimi attract readers who value their time and access to a wide range of titles. Moreover, digital books are available 24/7. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Legimi also helped to retain the users who could not access the on-site collection.
- Following new media trends – Reading books in a digital format has gained popularity in recent years in Poland, so they also should be included in the library's offering.

Factors determining the choice of distributor

Polish public libraries consider various factors when selecting a distributor of digital books. They compare the cost of a single code, the number and variety of titles available, the format of available books (ebooks, audiobooks, synchrobooks, or podcasts), their genres (fiction, science, or popular science), and how the distributor's offering meets the needs of different audiences (children, teens, and adults). Other important factors are the language of the books (preferably Polish), the distributor's position on the publishing market, and technical issues, such as the possibility of one title being used by multiple readers simultaneously or of using the service on more than one device, with the option to synchronize the book between these devices. From the library's point of view, customer support and access to consumption data are also essential.

In our interviews, the libraries pointed out that they are testing new services more and more eagerly as competition in the book market increases, looking for those that are more advantageous in terms of price or that may diversify their e-collection, thus meeting the different needs of their users. The librarians highlight that every distributor has something unique in its book catalog, which may be titles from publishers with whom they have signed exclusive agreements or original productions, such as audio series. A 12-month contract with Legimi may bind the library, but additional funds gained during the year may be used to purchase codes from other distributors on an ad hoc basis.

At the same time, some respondents confirmed that libraries are not always interested in using the services of companies other than Legimi. It should be noted, however, that

Empik Go, a competing distributor, has attracted the attention of some libraries. Some of the respondents stated that the reasons for using this distributor in addition to the existing Legimi service were to test a new platform with access to e-resources, find a more favorable price for this type of service, diversify the library's offering, or respond to readers' interest in specific platforms. These reasons indicate a wide variety of attitudes toward expanding library offerings to include the services of new distributors.

Creation of consortia

Polish public libraries organize themselves into consortia in order to partner with Legimi. Libraries sign a group purchase contract for access to digital book databases and provide power of attorney to the library acting as the leader, which is usually a regional library. The contract allows the leader to represent partner libraries in negotiating access conditions and prices of access codes. Each library independently selects the number of codes or pages, which can be increased during the term of the contract, and pays its financial obligations. We reached out to 14 of the 20 libraries acting as leaders (Table 6).

Table 6. Number of libraries in consortia (based on data provided by libraries and corrected by Legimi in June 2023)

Name of the consortium leader library	City	Province (voivodship)	Date of obtaining access to Legimi	Establishment of the Legimi consortium	Total number of libraries in the consortium (2023)
Warsaw Public Library Central Library of the Mazowieckie Province (Biblioteka Publiczna m.st. Warszawy - Biblioteka Główna Województwa Mazowieckiego)	Warszawa	Mazowieckie	2017	2020	171
Lower Silesian Public Library in Wrocław (Dolnośląska Biblioteka Publiczna im. Tadeusza Mikulskiego)	Wrocław	Dolnośląskie	2016	2017	79
Regional Public Library and Culture Animation Center in Poznań (Wojewódzka Biblioteka Publiczna i Centrum Animacji Kultury)	Poznań	Wielkopolskie	2017	2017	76
Regional Public Library in Kraków (Wojewódzka Biblioteka Publiczna)	Kraków	Małopolskie	2016	2016	71
Regional and Municipal Public Library Them. Joseph Conrad-Korzeniowski in Gdańsk (Wojewódzka i Miejska Biblioteka Publiczna im. Josepha Conrada – Korzeniowskiego)	Gdańsk	Pomorskie	2015	2020	61
Regional Public Library in Olsztyn (Wojewódzka Biblioteka Publiczna im. Emilii Sukertowej Biedrawiny)	Olsztyn	Warmińsko-mazurskie	2018	2019	60
Józef Piłsudski Regional and Municipal Public Library in Łódź (Wojewódzka Biblioteka Publiczna im. Marszałka Józefa Piłsudskiego)	Łódź	Łódzkie	2021	2021	59

Nicolaus Copernicus Public Regional Library in Toruń (Wojewódzka Biblioteka Publiczna - Książnica Kopernikańska)	Toruń	Kujawsko-pomorskie, Toruń-Włocławek sub-region	2019	2020	52
Regional and City Public Library in Rzeszów (Wojewódzka i Miejska Biblioteka Publiczna)	Rzeszów	Podkarpackie	2018	2020	46
Silesian Library in Katowice (Biblioteka Śląska)	Katowice	Śląskie	2020	2020	46
Regional Public Library in Opole (Wojewódzka Biblioteka Publiczna im. Emanuela Smołki)	Opole	Opolskie	2019	2020	46
Regional and Municipal Public Library in Bydgoszcz (Wojewódzka i Miejska Biblioteka Publiczna im. dr. Witolda Bełzy)	Bydgoszcz	Kujawsko-pomorskie, Bydgoszcz sub-region	2016	2016	39
Cultural Center in Drawsko Pomorskie – Municipal and District Public Library (Miejska i Powiatowa Biblioteka im. Stefana Żeromskiego)	Drawsko Pomorskie	Zachodniopomorskie	2018	2021	34
Łukasz Górnicki Podlachian Library in Białystok (Książnica Podlaska im. Łukasza Górnickiego)	Białystok	Podlaskie	2020	2020	34
Witold Gombrowicz Regional Public Library (Wojewódzka Biblioteka Publiczna im. Witolda Gombrowicza)	Kielce	Świętokrzyskie	2020	2022	31
Hieronim Łopaciński Regional Public Library in Lublin (Wojewódzka Biblioteka Publiczna im. Hieronima Łopacińskiego)	Lublin	Lubelskie	2020	2021	31
Regional and Municipal Public Library of C. Norwida in Zielona Góra (Wojewódzka i Miejska Biblioteka Publiczna im. Cypriana Norwida w Zielonej Górze)	Zielona Góra	Lubuskie, Zielona Góra sub-region	2017	2017	29
Regional and Municipal Public Library in Gorzów Wielkopolski (Wojewódzka i Miejska Biblioteka Publiczna im. Zbigniewa Herberta)	Gorzów Wielkopolski	Lubuskie, Gorzów Wielkopolski sub-region	2018	2019	18
Koszalin Joachim Lelewel Public Library (Koszalińska Biblioteka Publiczna im. Joachima Lelewela)	Koszalin	Zachodniopomorskie	2017	2018*	10
City Library in Sławno (Miejska Biblioteka Publiczna w Sławnie)	Sławno	Zachodniopomorskie	2021	2021	6
TOTAL					999

Note: Legimi's data was used for corrections. *(Kwaśniak 2021).

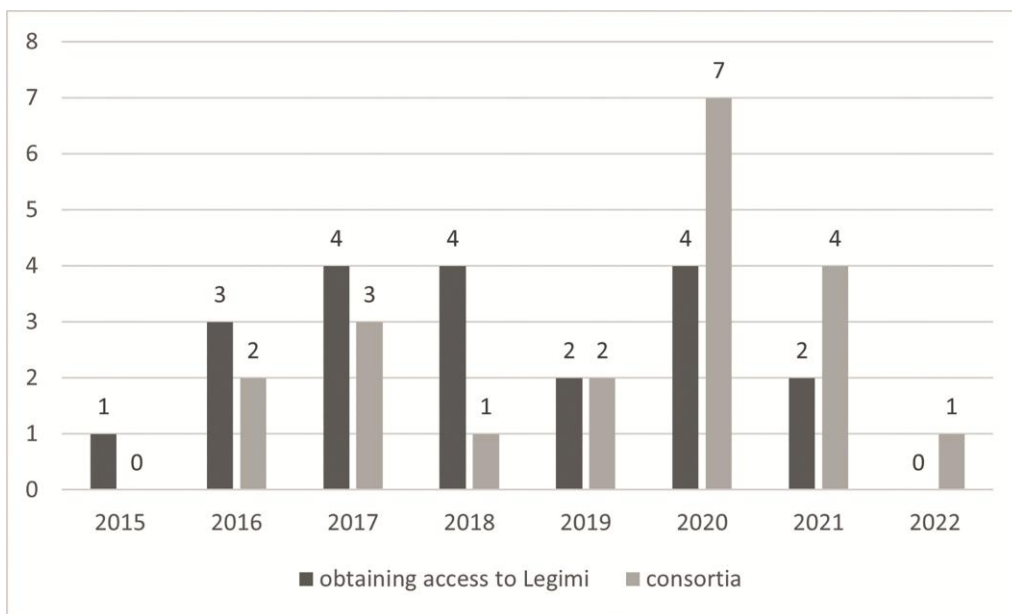
As of January 1, 2023, Poland consists of 16 provinces. There are 20 Legimi consortia in the country (Warmińsko-Mazurskie and Lubuskie provinces each have two consortia, while Zachodniopomorskie Province has three). A Legimi representative confirmed in June 2023 that the company had signed contracts with 999 libraries clustered in consortia (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Number of libraries (without branches) in Legimi consortia per province



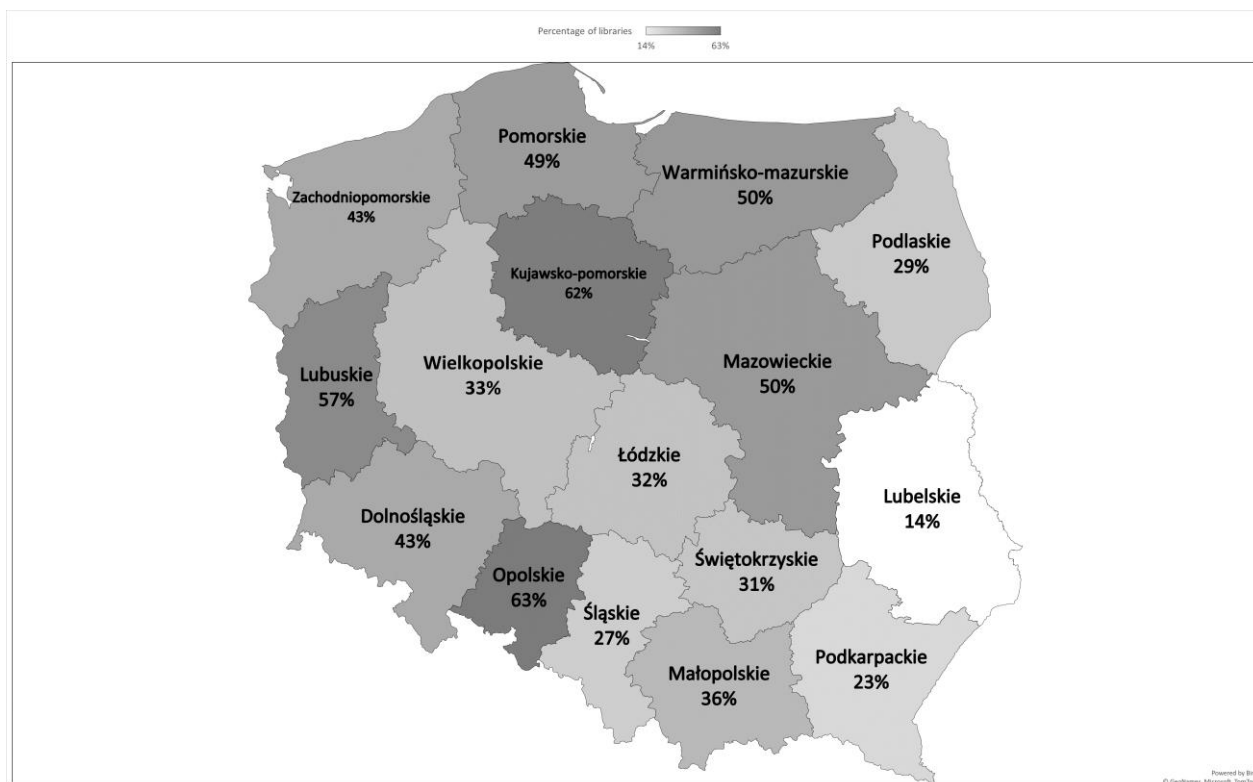
Legimi has a long-term partnership with the library in Gdańsk. In 2016, three other libraries signed up; four more contracts were signed in 2017, 2018, and 2020 (Table 6). Most consortia were formed during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Figure 2). Eight consortia were established the same year that library leaders started partnering with Legimi and seven more began a year after signing their individual contracts (Table 6). It was generally the case that consortia were formed either immediately after signing with Legimi or shortly after a leader library had tested the service.

Figure 2. Number of new contracts with Legimi and number of consortia formed throughout subsequent years (only libraries acting as consortium leader)



In the following provinces, the largest number of libraries have joined the Legimi consortium: Mazowieckie (171), where Warsaw is located; Kujawsko-Pomorskie (91), where two consortia operate; followed by Dolnośląskie (79), with its capital in Wrocław and Małopolskie with Kraków (71). Figures 1 and 3 show that eastern Poland has the fewest libraries participating in a consortium.

Figure 3. Percentage of public libraries (without branches) in a particular province that belong to the Legimi consortium



There is an average coverage of 40% of libraries participating in a consortium, with the highest coverage in Opolskie (63%), Kujawsko-Pomorskie (62%), and Lubuskie

Provinces (57%), and the lowest in Lubelskie (14%), Podkarpackie (23%), and Podlaskie Provinces (29%) (Figure 3).³

Our data indicates that the consortia are often created because of the following reasons:

- Financial – The greater the number of libraries in the consortium, the lower the price of the Legimi access code. The factors that determine the price include the selected billing model, the library's history with the company, and marketing benefits.
- Administrative – Because the consortium leader represents its partner libraries, negotiations and purchasing are more efficient.
- Image and statutory – The leaders of the consortia are most often regional libraries, which serve as a role model for local libraries.
- Technical – Consortia leaders assist with the implementation of the service and organize training for libraries with Legimi representatives.

Consortia may vary in composition from year to year or within successive contracts signed with Legimi. Sometimes, libraries from another region join the consortium. There have also been a few cases when school libraries joined. The consortium leader is not always a regional library. For instance, in Zachodniopomorskie Province, the first consortium was formed on the initiative of the Cultural Center in Drawsko Pomorskie, acting on behalf of the local library in the town. Since then, none of the libraries from the larger cities in the province (with individual access to Legimi) were interested in establishing a consortium. This may indicate that the establishment of a consortium does not depend on the size or role of the library in the region, but on the determination and engagement of librarians.

Public libraries that form a consortium receive a favorable price per code negotiated by the consortium leader and a number of codes proportional to their contribution. The question of code limits and consortium organization are managed by the leader. Legimi's contracts with consortium leaders are updated every 12 months on behalf of the consortium leader and the cooperating public libraries. A library may join the consortium at any time by signing an appropriate contract with the leader. Therefore, the list of consortium members is not constant. After testing the code distribution, some libraries leave the consortium, while others join. More than one Legimi contract may be signed during a calendar year and separate consortia may be formed to purchase codes of various types, such as monthly and annual.

Information about Legimi is exchanged among libraries in the same consortium rather than between libraries in different provinces. Some libraries admitted that they do not exchange information with other consortia. One library reported that the issue of access

³ We used data from Legimi for 2023 and data from the 2021 report of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage as of December 31, 2021 (GUS 2022b) to calculate the percentage of libraries because the official reports do not provide the most recent data on public libraries excluding branches.

to digital books is discussed during meetings of regional library directors and other library staff. According to the representative of one library, their regional library was also eager to learn from others and to serve as a model for new consortia.

Funding framework

Funding sources

When it comes to the funding framework of partnership with Legimi, our data indicates that Polish libraries rely on three primary sources:

- Subsidies – funds received from the organizer, that is, local authorities such as provinces, districts, and municipalities, for the operation of public libraries as stipulated by the Polish Law on Libraries
- Subventions – funds provided by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage within the National Reading Development Program 2.0 for 2021–2025 (hereinafter referred to as “NRDP 2.0”) under Priority 1 – Improving the Offer of Public Libraries, 1.1 – Purchase new publications and provide remote access (Biblioteka Narodowa 2021). It was introduced in the second round of the program to provide funding for remote access to ebooks and audiobooks (Rada Ministrów 2021). Depending on the library’s finances and budget strategy for the coming years, the share of ministerial funds invested in remote access may vary (from less than 20% through 50% to even 90% or 100%). The Ministry of Culture and National Heritage granted PLN 25,955,716 in 2021 and PLN 28,556,263 in 2022 (approximately EUR 5,643,283 and EUR 6,092,393, respectively⁴). Grant decisions were announced in the second half of the year, on October 14, 2021, July 11, 2022 (first round), and November 21, 2022 (second round), which affected the allocation of funds for Legimi’s service.
- Participatory budgeting – despite being a rather ad hoc means of financing, it gained importance as the reading community in a particular city became more engaged, for example, in the case of Bydgoszcz’s Participatory Budget, which included a project called “Bydgoszcz Reads Endlessly.”

Over time, each funding source contributes differently to the purchase of Legimi services. The librarians who prepare reports for local government authorities and the users who lobby for subsidies from the authorities are becoming more successful in increasing library funding.

Although the amounts allocated for purchasing Legimi access are a trade secret, interviews with library representatives indicate that the service severely strains their budgets. More detailed information from the six selected libraries shows that about 30% of the funds for acquiring books are allocated for digital book services provided by Legimi and Empik Go (those conclusions are based on partial data) (Table 7). We have

⁴ Based on the average exchange rates for 2021 and 2022.

anonymized the library names in accordance with confidentiality agreements.

Table 7. Estimated book acquisition funds based on six public libraries in different provinces in 2022 (in PLN)

Funds for the purchase (in PLN)				
Library in the city with ... residents	Paper books	Remote access to digital trade books	Remote access to digital non-trade books	Total
less than 100,000	71% (53,000)	29% (22,000)		75,000
100,000-149,999	no data	25-30%		no data
150,000-200,000	68% (342,700)	32% (160,652)		503,352
150,000-200,000	no data	15,8%		no data
150,000-200,000	no data	43,5%		no data
over 500,000	54% (87,500)	31% (50,000)	25,000 (15%)	162,500

Billing model and code distribution

Most consortia have adopted a billing model which limits the number of access codes instead of limiting the number of pages per library. Thanks to these codes, library users can access Legimi's catalog for free for a month (in most cases) or even a year (rarely). Moreover, a book can be read at the same time by multiple users. It is worth mentioning that until mid-2022, libraries that chose the code-limiting model to provide access to audiobooks and synchrobooks paid 10% more than for only ebooks and 30% more for access to Kindle devices. However, the price has changed since then and library users now have access to Legimi's entire library catalog.

In most cases, a limited number of codes are available each period, meaning that not every user can access the service. Among the consortia, only the one in Wrocław has fully implemented a model with a page limit instead of a limited number of access codes, meaning that the library may give an access code to any user who requests it. It is important to note that in Wrocław, users gain access to the service for the entire year, not just one month⁵. However, to ensure fair access to the service, the library must secure a consistent funding framework and monitor the number of pages read by library readers throughout the year. Although some libraries tested this model during the initial phase of interest in the service, most eventually abandoned it, primarily due to concerns (confirmed or anticipated) about readers' dissatisfaction when the library exceeds the page limit and all its users lose access to Legimi.

Most libraries believe that issuing monthly codes, although logistically challenging, ensures fair access to the service. It is possible to pick up a code at the library counter or

⁵ The Lower Silesian Public Library in Wrocław reached its page limit in September 2023. Although the library still has a page limit contract with Legimi it limited the number of annual codes issued in 2024 to 2,000.

to receive it by email. The requirement that users only be able to obtain a code in the library often masks the desire to increase visits to the library and to develop the reading habit of regularly borrowing from on-site collections. Some libraries have also recently enabled readers to download codes on their own after logging in to an account in the online library catalog. In some libraries, users who do not activate their code within a given month or period may temporarily lose the right to receive a new code.

In some libraries, additional funds obtained throughout the year are used to increase the number of codes, purchase codes with a different expiration date, or purchase codes from a distributor other than Legimi. However, a user may only receive one code in a given period for the selected or currently available service.

Consumption

Some library representatives were eager to share data with us, while others refused, stating that trade secrets protected their contracts or that they had no insight into the previous years' statistics. Therefore, the collected survey data concerning the number of codes issued and activated, downloads, books opened, and active Legimi accounts are not comprehensive. Some libraries have only data for their use, not the whole consortium, or they did not indicate what these data refer to. In addition, making comparisons between libraries is difficult because Legimi contracts are not usually aligned with the calendar year and libraries adopt various billing models. They purchase additional codes during the accounting period, and other libraries join consortia. Moreover, the statistics are dynamic, so if previously opened ebooks are reopened the following month, they will be counted for the current month, not the previous one.

The data provided by libraries acting as consortium leaders indicate that the number of issued access codes fluctuates, possibly due to additional or exhausted funding. Even though many libraries did not provide data, or it was difficult to compare data between libraries, we confirmed that the number of Legimi codes issued and activated, as well as of loans and users, has been increasing in recent years, especially when it comes to large, regional libraries serving as consortium leaders (Tables 8–10). However, there have been reports from library representatives that in some – possibly the smallest – libraries, the current, usually modest demand determines the number of codes purchased each year: approximately 10 codes per month.

Table 8. Number of Legimi loans in consortia and libraries providing data

Library in the city with ... residents	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
100,000-149,999 (C)			19,594	44,794	66,413	81,822
150,000-200,000 (C)			31,778	54,089	135,022	56,500
less than 100,000 (L)	1,883	6,681	12,340	12,809	13,044	
150,000-200,000 (L)		1,955	35,915	62,876	47,700	61,096
150,000-200,000 (L)				1,413	28,348	46,621
150,000-200,000 (L)					54,427	59,547
250,000-300,000 (L)				25,956	40,965	43,762

Abbreviations: C = consortium; L = library

Table 9. Codes issued and Legimi users in consortia and libraries providing data

Consortia		2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Library in the city with ... residents							
100,000-149,999	NoC	2,312	3,666	4,749	5,683	6,716	6,818
	NoU	827	877	948	1,101	1,247	1,114
	CpU	2,8	4,2	5,0	5,2	5,4	6,1
150,000-200,000	NoC			4,400	7,091	16,540	5,982
250,000-300,000	NoC				6,968	6,381	7,370
over 500,000	NoC			4,441	8,135	12,666	13,687
over 500,000	NoC						17,886
Libraries							
Library in the city with ... residents		2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
less than 100,000	NoC		287	714	1,074	1,841	1,520
	NoU		143	205	269	298	277
	CpU		2,0	3,5	4,0	6,2	5,5
150,000-200,000	NoC				300	500	620
over 500,000	NoC		2,056	3,076	3,796	4,104	5,076
over 500,000	NoC			902	2,006	2,366	2,813

Abbreviations: NoC = number of codes (issued); NoU = number of Legimi users; CpU = codes per user.

As mentioned, libraries can buy additional codes annually from different distributors if additional funds become available. For example, the number of Legimi codes issued in one of the libraries that provided data decreased (from 16,540 in 2021 to 5,982 in 2022). At the same time, the number of codes issued from Empik Go grew (from 1,124 in 2021 to 14,487 in 2022). Only the library in Wrocław provided data regarding Legimi users compared to active borrowers during a given year (according to the definition of active borrowers from Statistics Poland, these are people who borrowed at least one book each year).⁶ However, the actual number of Legimi users may be higher than reported since one code can be used on two devices. The data does not indicate how many Legimi users have borrowed paper books or how many solely read digital books through Legimi. Nevertheless, the number of active readers decreased during the year 2020. At the same time, the number of Legimi users increased, which continues to grow to the present day.

Table 10. Active borrowers and Legimi users in Lower Silesian Public Library in Wrocław from 2019 to 2022

	2019	2020	2021	2022
Active borrowers	9,665	6,597	5,326	6,650
Legimi users	902	2,006	2,366	2,813

According to reports published by the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, 609 (25.6%) libraries that received funding from the NRDP 2.0 program purchased remote access to new publications in 2021.⁷ A year later, that number had increased to 699 (30.75%). In 2021 and 2022, respectively, libraries purchased 107,060 and 106,940 monthly codes, 26,547 and 695,060 codes other than monthly, access to 60.38 and 88.04

⁶ It is worth noting that the number of active borrowers in some libraries includes those who have borrowed both physical and digital books from Legimi or similar services. Therefore, some surveyed libraries had difficulties providing data on the relationship between the number of active borrowers of the library and the number of users of the book streaming services.

⁷ Additionally, 499 libraries gained access from their own funds (MKiDN 2022, 41).

million pages, and approximately 1.16 and 1.96 million titles of publications from Legimi, Empik Go, and Ibuk Libra (MKiDN 2022, 38; MKiDN 2023, 45). One of the most striking trends is the increase in the number of codes other than monthly. The report did not provide information regarding services purchased by specific libraries from particular distributors.

Although the number of codes distributed increased, none of the libraries we reached out to confirmed that the partnership with Legimi or any other ebook distributor changed their staffing levels.

Research limitations

One of the significant limitations of this study is the lack of systematic, detailed, and comparable data concerning the consumption of digital books provided by Legimi to Polish public libraries. We attribute this to the relative newness of digital book services in Polish libraries and the lack of instructions from the institutions responsible for collecting, extracting, analyzing, archiving, and reporting data concerning streaming digital books. This observed limitation in the Polish case is reminiscent of the lack of transparency in e-lending that was observed in an analysis of English-speaking countries conducted by Giblin and Weatherall (2022). However, it should be noted that many Polish libraries that are currently part of a consortium were already using remote access services for their collections (not just trade books) many years before the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, some good practices or recommendations regarding the method of reporting details on remote access should have been worked out.

Moreover, not all statistical data are available to librarians from the interface (statistics panel) provided by Legimi, or they cannot be extracted. Some of them may be misinterpreted and misreported due to inconsistencies in terminology (for example, downloads/activated loans⁸ or codes purchased/issued/activated). In some libraries, detailed information on the number of people using the service in successive years, the number of books downloaded and opened, etc., is also not usually collected or was not in the early days of using Legimi. Without access to the distributor's database, it is impossible to analyze changes over time and determine the impact of remote access services on, for example, the number of active users in libraries. We see a need for libraries to demand more advanced technical tools from the distributors that could help gather data about the actual consumption.

As for now, the consumption data is incomplete, uses imprecise terminology, and is difficult to compare due to the differing contract periods and billing models and certain technical limitations in measuring book streams to analyze statistics from previous years. Legimi contracts are for 12 months, counted from the date of signing the contract. It is challenging to make year-on-year comparisons with other libraries unless their contract

⁸ The opening of a borrowed title is counted only once, but with the date of the last action, not the first. This leads to errors in interpreting decreases in the number of loans, particularly those transferring to subsequent years rather than months.

periods overlap or are similar. Therefore, data should be compared over consecutive contract periods rather than years for libraries using the same model.

The reports from the Polish Librarians' Association cover only 2020 and 2021 (Jeziarska 2021, 4). They do not indicate which remote access services the libraries use. Similarly, Statistics Poland's annual reports on public libraries mention remote access services in a very general way. Neither on the website of the distributor, Legimi, nor of many consortia leaders can we find a list of libraries that belong to the consortia. Only 5 out of the 14 libraries we spoke with provided such lists, while the rest only indicated the number of libraries in the regional consortium for the selected period (2022 or 2023).

The collection of detailed data on digital book services began with the second round of the NRDP 2.0 program for 2021–2025, introducing the possibility of funding library novelties such as remote access services for books. While NRDP 2.0 reports were supposed to provide information such as which service was used, how many access codes were purchased and activated, how much the license contract was worth, etc., the information in the official report was also quite general. The information on the amount of funding for each library has been provided to us, and data regarding how these funds were allocated is also available. Nevertheless, the reports do not specify where (in which libraries) or for how long which services have been provided. We do not receive the number of codes, pages, and publications purchased separately through Legimi, Empik Go, and Ibuk Libra. Since NRDP 2.0 is not the only source of funding for access to digital books, a deeper understanding of the funding framework provided by the local authorities is also necessary. Libraries submit reports on their statutory activities to them, often justifying the need to increase funding for services. However, these documents are not publicly available. Financial data is unavailable because it is a trade secret.

Discussion

The library's perspective

Polish libraries decide to use Legimi's services mainly due to trends in the media market that significantly changed users' habits. Expectations of instant access and convenience can be met by services exploiting the potential of streaming media. Companies such as Legimi relieve libraries of the need to invest in developing their own platform and to negotiate with publishers the license terms and prices of particular titles, as in the case of many e-lending solutions. Libraries acquire a finished product, for which they pay with funds from earmarked subsidies granted by local and central authorities. Thanks to the partnership with Legimi, users of Polish public libraries gain access to unlimited, though time-constrained use of a vast catalog of digital books in different formats. We discovered that Legimi offers a smaller catalog to libraries than commercial users. However, the catalog for libraries includes bestsellers and new titles from a wide variety of publishers on the Polish market. Through Legimi, libraries may also provide access to out-of-commerce digital titles.

Thanks to these conditions, Polish libraries do not need to deal with the problem of ebooks' accessibility, as in the case of e-lending and publishers' practices in major English-speaking markets (Giblin et al. 2019b).

Partnership with commercial distributors, like Legimi, allows the library to broaden its book collection to new formats and titles; this is crucial, especially for libraries from small communities that do not have the resources to develop their on-site collection. The wide catalog offered by Legimi allows it to reach out to new users and, consequently, promote readership. In addition, libraries do not need to deal with archiving and preserving the content.

Nevertheless, libraries cannot control which titles are available to their users, since they are merely paying for a package of access codes subsequently distributed to their users, which may raise the question of long-term availability and preservation of the digital collection (IFLA 2013).

Furthermore, access to such outsourced book catalogs is expensive. Thus, libraries are constantly seeking additional funding to ensure that readers continue to have access to these services. The choice of a code limit or a page limit is usually determined by how a library perceives its ability to continue to fund the service. If a library employs the page-limit billing model, there is a greater risk of losing access to the service within a year. Our respondents also raised several technical issues relating to the need to control page limit consumption. The funds financing the service (organizer's subsidy or NRDP 2.0 program) depended mainly on when the library contracted with the distributor and what funds it had available at the time. It is important to remember that some endowments, such as NRDP 2.0, are not a permanent funding source.

Fierce competition on the Polish digital book market challenges the dominance of one actor, such as Legimi, and can result in lower prices for institutional clients, such as libraries. In the case of video streaming services, users frequently migrate between the platforms in search of original and exclusive content. This may also be reflected in the readers' preferences, making it necessary for libraries to constantly diversify remote services and consult their users in this regard. According to our research, many libraries already offer access to many digital book subscription services, but these services cannot be combined because the user may only receive a code for one service.

Our research illustrates that many libraries are experiencing considerable interest in access codes from their users. The new service is popular, but measuring its use is difficult because to a large extent it is beyond the libraries' control. Firstly, they do not own the physical medium, but only mediate access to titles in digital format. Secondly, the measurement tools offered by external companies do not consider all the needs of libraries in terms of statistics. Thirdly, there is a lack of adequate guidelines from the national institutions collecting statistics from libraries. Finally, a certain elusiveness of streaming services can also be highlighted here, such as counting open loans by the date of the most recent action, rather than statically per month.

The user's perspective

From the user's perspective, receiving an access code from a library is advantageous because it is free of charge and it gives access books without making a reservation or waiting for it to become available (as in the case of e-lending and especially the one copy / one user model, see more in Liguzinski 2023), or visiting the public library building in order to borrow the paper books. Every user with an access code can download at least one digital book (there is no limit on the number) and read it offline on one or two devices. However, the range of available formats vary according to the arrangements between a library and Legimi. The fact that not all publishers agree to make their publications available as part of Legimi library subscriptions may also limit library users' access to specific titles.

Receiving an access code is not always guaranteed to every library user, since most libraries buy a certain number of codes rather than a restricted page pool. The distribution of codes to users is very often managed according to the principle of "first come, first served," meaning that it works according to the logic of a lottery or by the internal policy of a library, without a guarantee that the user will have the same access in consecutive periods. Access to digital books, therefore, is not permanent and stable, but short-term. It is lost either when the code expires and the user has not received another code or when the library exceeds the limit of pages purchased for all users and cannot buy a new package of codes.

On many Facebook groups for Polish readers of digital books, there have been many comments on the unfair – according to users – model of distributing access codes in public libraries. If the codes are distributed only in the library building and within the limited opening hours, users who work during the day have little chance to ask for a new code. On the other hand, if the library decides to distribute the codes via email, it must contact many users in a short time and must respond to requests from those dissatisfied with the fact that they have not received a code. The libraries instead argue that on-site distribution strengthens the relationship between their users and the library as an institution and that the monthly distribution model (not yearly) guarantees fair access to the service. However, it does not solve the problem of equal access to books, which is one of the most important principles of libraries, raised for example by the IFLA (2015). This leaves room for questioning the legitimacy of a public library which cannot offer access to digital books to every user.

Some of the librarians we interviewed pointed out that when a new package of access codes is available after the hiatus caused by exceeding the limit, the number of waiting users is not as high as before. The respondents explained this by the fact that the users have moved to another library or have purchased a commercial subscription. Having the opportunity to become acquainted with another distributor's offer for free may enhance users' willingness to use its commercial services. Nevertheless, our Legimi respondent stated that this does not mean that users who do not receive a free library code are switching to a commercial Legimi subscription in substantial numbers. We see this as a

question for further research.

Equally, the service provided by Legimi and other digital book distributors via the public library competes for users' attention with other media formats (streamed music, videos, films, and podcasts), which can in turn discourage users from constantly making efforts to obtain an access code to digital books.

The distributor's perspective

From the distributor's standpoint, Legimi gains access to many users and customers. According to Statistics Poland, Polish public libraries had 4.8 million active borrowers in 2021 and 5.1 million in 2022. A typical regional library, such as the one in Wrocław, has about 6,650 active borrowers and 2,813 Legimi users. Despite the observed increase in Legimi users, it seems difficult to predict how many active library users will change their habits and begin reading digital books or how saturated the library sales channel might thus become. For the distributor, partnering with libraries may be very demanding, as it implies a constant effort to implement services in new libraries and to work on changing the users' habits.

Legimi has a commercial advantage over its competitors among trade book distributors, as it was the first company to start operating on the library market. By the end of 2022, all Legimi users (not distinguishing between library and commercial or Polish and German ones) numbered 230,000 (Legimi, 2023b). Even though not all libraries use Legimi's services and not all users read digital books, reaching out to library users helps Legimi increase its subscribers and market share. As new competitors in the library sales channel do exist, Legimi may also face a question of profitability.

Conclusions and further research

According to the data provided to us by Legimi, the service is used by nearly 1,100 Polish libraries which means that Legimi has reached approximately 42% of all public libraries in Poland (excluding branches). By partnering with commercial distributors such as Legimi, libraries seek solutions to address users' changing needs and new media habits and to maintain interest in library services. There has been an increase in Legimi users in some libraries over the past year. However, libraries cannot determine whether the use of remote access services affects the number of active users and whether using services such as Legimi will impact the lending of paper books. As a Legimi access code can be used on two devices, the number of Legimi users may exceed the number of codes issued. It is possible that the COVID-19 pandemic and library investments (new lending infrastructure and organizing events and meetings with authors) could have contributed to the fluctuation in the number of active users. Based on more detailed data about ebook and audiobook consumption, it would be worth investigating whether remote access to digital books impacts the number of active users, particularly among those age groups where the use of library services is low (people aged 20–24 accounted for 5.3% of library users, while those aged 25–44 comprised 63.9%).

Overall, in 2020 and 2021, there was noticeably more interest in remote services, with libraries purchasing more code packages and consortia expanding (GUS 2022b). However, gathering the precise statistical data on remote access mentioned in the Limitations section would require the implementation of clear terminology and recommendations related to reporting methodology. To compile statistical data nationally, it also seems necessary to develop a glossary of terms that considers the differences between the various services⁹.

Despite the fact that Legimi is regarded as a comprehensive service, libraries are open to partnering with other distributors, mainly if they offer a competitive price or purchasing model (e.g., without a contract). The question we could address in a further study is how the competition between the commercial distributors of digital books influences the availability and use of remote access services in public libraries. Future research could also include a comparison of the way public libraries in Poland make digital books available and the countries where more common are licensing models (Withney and De Castell 2017).

Based on the accounts of our respondents, Polish public libraries do not perceive cooperation with commercial actors, such as Legimi, as a threat to their autonomy or societal position; nor are they concerned about the commercialization of library services, which has been pointed out in the case of e-lending (Widdersheim 2014). However, further investigation is necessary to explore that question, as we did not ask about it explicitly in our survey. Nevertheless, the analysis of Polish libraries' partnership with Legimi allows us to see the public library as both an institution that provides access to information and culture in novel ways and as an actor that shapes new reading habits and affects book market dynamics. This kind of interaction encourages library users to test new modes of reading, since they can access wider catalogs of titles free of charge. It also stimulates social engagement when users advocate for more funds for Legimi codes from their local authorities through participatory budgets. However, little is known about how the users' perception of public libraries is affected by the partnership with commercial actors and how this relationship changes the institutional role of public libraries in general. Considering that many users can now explore and test out new digital reading paths free of charge, modern public libraries may significantly impact reading habits more than ever.

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⁹ There are, of course, standards regarding library statistics (e.g., ISO 2789:2022 Information and documentation – International library statistics – see ISO 2022) and guidance from statistics offices on understanding particular terms. However, it is worth noting that the technological solutions available to librarians do not always directly correspond to the proposed terms. Librarians' free interpretation of them then translates into under or overestimation of statistics related to the number of loans and users.

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