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PREVENTING THEFT IN LIBRARIES



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KEYWORDS: Theft of library collections. Library collection protection. Library video surveillance systems. Library user control. Magnetic strips. RFID tags. University libraries. University of Warsaw Library.

ABSTRACT: **Thesis/Purpose** – The aim of this article is to discuss methods for protecting library collections against theft and the problems that arise in this regard. **Method** – A literature review method was used, combined with an analysis of sources in the form of annual reports of selected libraries and their websites. **Results/Conclusions** – Technological developments in recent decades have allowed libraries to rely on analog and digital systems to perform some of their book protection tasks. Video surveillance systems and anti-theft security measures in the form of magnetic strips and RFID tags, which utilize radio frequency identification (RFID), are most frequently mentioned in this context. Investing in such resources is expensive, but worthwhile. However, experts agree that technical solutions cannot completely eliminate theft in libraries. Therefore, technical tools should be considered a support for conventional measures, which

emphasize consistent adherence to library regulations and discreet monitoring of unusual user behavior. Practical methods for protecting library collections against theft are discussed using the example of solutions used at the University of Warsaw Library (hereinafter also referred to as BUW)¹.

INTRODUCTION

The practice of stealing from libraries is as old as libraries themselves. This is evidenced by the texts of curses and warnings addressed to book thieves dating back to antiquity cited by Zofia Walczy. In subsequent centuries, popes sometimes issued decrees imposing the penalty of excommunication on those who stole from libraries. For example, a decree for the protection of the collections of the Jagiellonian Library was issued by Pope Clement X in 1672 (Walczy, 1976, pp. 841-846). The National Library in Warsaw, then known as the Załuski Library of the Commonwealth, received a similar papal brief imposing excommunication on book thieves in 1752 from Benedict XIV (Pamiętki, 1997, pp. 84-85).

In one of the chapters of his book *Dziwne historie książki* ("Strange Stories of Books") Zbysław Arct wrote about "bookcatchers", a term he used to describe those who borrowed books from monastery collections without any intention of returning them, sometimes simply hiding valuable titles in the recesses of their large cloaks. Among them Arct singled out distinguished bookcatchers that included such important figures in the development of Polish librarianship at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries as Józef Andrzej Załuski, Tadeusz Czacki, Józef Maksymilian Ossoliński, and Samuel Bogumił Linde (Arct, 1969, pp. 67-93).

Theft in libraries is one of a number of undesirable behaviors among users. The most common problem in this regard is the late return of borrowed materials, with more serious offenses such as drug-related offenses and indecent behavior sometimes cited. However, theft of library collections remains a significant issue and has even earned a dedicated Wikipedia entry (Library theft – https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Library_theft). Moreover, the problem of theft in libraries today is not limited to theft of collections but can also involve the theft of items belonging to other library users, possibly identity theft, and other similar offenses related to cybercrime.

It seems that in recent decades, the means of protecting library collections from damage and theft have become significantly less stringent. First, the idea of open access to shelves emerged, leading to modern libraries,

¹ I would like to thank Justyna Koziak, Agata Mickiewicz, Andrzej Regmund and Grzegorz Kłębek from the University of Warsaw Library for their help in obtaining information about the security system and protection of collections at BUW.

especially academic and public ones, being designed to allow users to freely access portions of their collections without the need for librarians. When this practice first began, many considered it a revolutionary, bold, yet risky innovation, threatening the order on the shelves and the security of the collections. Today, however, especially in academic and public libraries, it is a standard solution. Almost two decades ago, Henryk Hollender wrote: “[...] open access may have been *controversial* twenty or thirty years ago, but now it is no longer so. A library without it is begging for the mayor or rector to close it down, posting a sign on the door announcing that the reading material is provided by Google, Inc., with a little support from bookstores, publishers, and digitization enthusiasts. Free access, group and individual workspaces, the ability to mix document types and workflows [...] this is the strength and *raison d’être* of today’s library [...]” (Hollender, 2009).

Those for whom free access to shelves was already a bold solution must have been even more surprised when, later on, another revolutionary innovation emerged, especially in academic libraries: so-called unstaffed hours (or staffless library hours), meaning situations where library staff are significantly reduced or even—with the exception of security staff—completely absent. In some libraries, this occurs most often in the afternoons and evenings, sometimes in the mornings and during the summer holidays. In addition, the possibility of independent borrowing was introduced through the use of self-service devices called self-checks. These modern conveniences, however, have made the protection of library collections and the control of user behavior a significant challenge in the organization of library operations. These improvements have allowed users to feel more free to navigate the library and engage in activities there. At the same time, however, the implementation of modern technological solutions has ensured that no library user should feel completely at ease, as technology not only records the moment of entry and exit from the library but also logs what happens within and verifies any unauthorized attempts to remove library materials.

Library science literature abounds with publications that address specific cases of theft from library collections, the methods used by thieves, and the actions taken to recover them. Some of these texts resemble crime stories in popular magazines (Reed, 2000). However, this is undoubtedly valuable reading, as it provides insights regarding the methods used by thieves and how to cope in crisis situations based on the difficult experiences of others. Actions undertaken by libraries in cooperation with law enforcement agencies when a theft has occurred and the stolen materials are particularly valuable are primarily aimed at identifying the perpetrators as quickly as possible, or at least identifying the suspects, preventing attempts to sell the stolen materials on the

antiquarian market or in online auctions, and ultimately achieving at least partial recovery of the lost items. The procedures for handling such cases are well-documented in library science literature and should be familiar, especially to staff managing special collections in libraries. A set of such actions, which should be included in an “emergency plan”, can be found, for example, in the American Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Special Collections Guidelines, which begin with the need to maintain a contact list of law enforcement agencies to be notified upon discovery of a theft as well as a contact list of institutions maintaining databases of stolen and missing materials, and to notify local and regional used bookstores and other specialized dealers as soon as possible (ACRL/RBMS Guidelines, 2009, rev. 2023). This article, however, attempts to identify procedures before the need to activate an emergency plan arises, following the principle of “prevention first, then minimization of damage”. Therefore, it does not describe specific theft cases or how the perpetrator was identified. Rather, it aims to identify appropriate methods and tools, meaning what libraries have at their disposal to prevent theft. A discussion of the spectacular thefts committed in Polish libraries in the late 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s can be found in an article by Joanna Prokop (Prokop, 2014). The author recalled, among other things:

- the theft of the first edition of Nicolaus Copernicus’s 1543 work *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* from the Scientific Library of the PAAS and PAS in Cracow in 1998,
- the theft of several dozen old prints from the Jagiellonian Library in 1999,
- the theft discovered in 2000 of old prints from the Library of the Catholic University of Lublin,
- the theft of old prints from the Provincial and Municipal Public Library in Zielona Góra in 2005,
- a series of thefts of old prints from seminary and monastery libraries in the 1990s.

To this sad yet far from exhaustive list of thefts in Polish libraries, one should add the high-profile theft of books from the 19th-century collections belonging to the University of Warsaw Library, which took place between 2022 and 2023 (Stańczyk, 2024). One of my interlocutors from the University of Warsaw Library stated that the security systems currently in use in libraries are useful and should be invested in, but an attack by well-trained professionals acting on commission, such as the one discovered at the University of Warsaw Library in 2023, is difficult to effectively defend against.

The most notorious and most frequently reported cases of library theft in the literature, of course, concern the most valuable collections—manuscripts, old prints, and iconographic materials. The loss of such items

is particularly devastating, so such cases gain publicity, and information about them ultimately reaches the public. However, in most cases the thefts go unnoticed because the social impact is considered low. Library users therefore attempt to appropriate materials that may not necessarily have significant bibliophilic value, but are valuable to them for some reason, for example, a helpful resource in studies or a missing element in a collection. It sometimes happens that determined students steal contemporary books that, on the one hand, they need for a course, but on the other hand, are too expensive to purchase, and the university library does not have the necessary number of copies available for loan.

There are therefore certain differences in the approaches to protection against theft of special collections and of contemporary collections. The exceptionally valuable portion of special collections is protected using more conventional methods. This doesn't mean that technology is secondary. On the contrary, alarm systems and video surveillance play a significant role, but precisely because of the exceptional museum, historical, and artistic value of special collections, modern additions such as magnetic strips or RFID tags are not installed. In their case, it is crucial to adhere to the regulations that restrict access to certain areas and selected collections. Particularly valuable special collections are stored in vaults and other dedicated rooms, sometimes in lockers with password access and additional mechanical and electronic security. Users of such collections are subject to constant direct observation and monitoring.

Regardless of the fact that the person using special collections must be verified² and belong to the category of authorized users, who, according to the adopted regulations, have the right to use special collections, these individuals must be under constant, yet discreet, observation while using these collections, and they should be aware of this. The direct and electronic monitoring system should be designed to discourage attempts to leave the field of view of the librarian on duty and the video surveillance cameras. A particularly sensitive moment is leaving the special collections reading room, especially when the user declares only a temporary departure. The literature on the subject indicates that thefts often occurred precisely at the moment when the perpetrator left the reading room, seemingly temporarily, leaving behind low-value items, but in reality completely departing, taking with them a collection item. Therefore, recommendations for accessing particularly valuable collections emphasize that each time a user leaves the reading room the materials should be returned to the librarian on duty. One additional idea recommended for accessing the most valuable collections is to weigh the materials twice, before they are

² I would add here that employees of special collections departments with the most valuable collections should be initially trained in identifying forged or stolen identity documents.

made available and upon return by the user (Wilkie, 2006). Of course, such a scale would have to be particularly accurate to detect the difference in weight caused by cutting a fragment from a valuable volume or replacing the original book block with worthless material or a facsimile.

Contemporary collections of significantly lower value, on the other hand, are made available in a less restrictive manner, often on a free-access shelf basis. However, in these cases, anti-theft protection is enhanced by elements that facilitate the location, identification, and provenance of materials, such as ownership stamps, barcodes, magnetic strips, and RFID tags.

THE EXTENT OF THEFT

The extent of library book theft is difficult to estimate because, as Z. Walczy noted many years ago, libraries do not keep statistics on materials deemed stolen. Therefore, they are reluctant to disclose such details, and sometimes they only learn of the theft when law enforcement agencies apprehend a criminal and seize library materials from him (Walczy, 1976, pp. 850-851). Piotr Ogrodzki, based on many years of experience at the Center for the Protection of Public Collections, concluded the same, writing that the discovery of the theft can occur even after several years and is sometimes a matter of chance (Ogrodzki, 2003). Joanna Prokop provides a specific example of how, in 2000, the management of the Catholic University of Lublin Library was unaware of the theft when police seized several dozen old prints from the home of the library's warehouseman (Prokop, 2014, p. 13). Christopher Reed made a similar observation, citing, among others, a case once conducted by the FBI during which it turned out that library representatives, asked to confirm the provenance of the seized loot, were unaware of the losses incurred (Reed, 2000, p. 46). Leading Polish university libraries do not include book theft data in their statistics, which is understandable, as it is difficult to definitively conclude that the absence of a book on the shelf and the absence of a record of its loan in the loan records necessarily mean it was stolen. For example, none of the Jagiellonian Library's last four reports from 2020-2023 mention the number of stolen books³. We also don't find such information in the reports of the Nicolaus Copernicus University Library in Toruń, the Adam Mickiewicz University Library in Poznań, or the University of Gdańsk Library. The same is true for the reports of the Wrocław University Library

³ As a side note, it is worth noting the significant disproportion between the amount collected by the Jagiellonian Library in fees for late returns and for damaged or lost books. The total amount of fees for overdue books in 2023 was PLN 175,000, while the total amount collected for damaged or lost books was only PLN 795! See M. Kusak, E. Valde-Nowak: *Activities of the Jagiellonian Library in 2023*. Report. "Biuletyn Biblioteki Jagiellońskiej". Years 73-74, 2023-2024, p. 159.

(WUL). There is no mention of stolen books in the last four years. The only surrogate for such information is data on the number of books removed from the inventory due to identified shortages and losses. However, if we were to rely solely on data from 2021-2022, the relatively small numbers would allow for cautious optimism. In 2021, WUL recorded only 65 such deletions from the inventory due to missing/lost items (WUL Report 2021, p. 39), while in 2022, the figure was 77 (WUL Report 2022, p. 47). However, the latest available report from 2023 presents a more alarming number. As many as 1,476 volumes were deleted from the inventory due to missing/lost items (WUL Report 2023, p. 46). This, of course, does not necessarily mean a sharp increase in the number of lost books in a given year, as this can easily be explained by more thorough and comprehensive inventory.

And here, the keyword for the issue under discussion appears – inventory. Library thefts are rarely detected *in statu nascendi*, and situations where specialized and well-prepared criminals are caught “red-handed” are rare. Although there are exceptions, such as the 2003 case when thieves were apprehended by the police while stealing valuable iconographic materials from the Jagiellonian Library (Ogrodzki, 2005, pp. 10–11). Therefore, when a suspicion of theft arises, it occurs either when a material ordered by a user based on a catalog description is not found in the correct location, or during a routine inventory. A periodic inventory is the moment when the librarian says “I’m checking”, and it provides an initial overview of the library’s losses caused by thefts. Ewa Barteczko, based on the experience of the National Library in Warsaw, wrote: “Probably many librarians are anxiously thinking about the annual inventory of reference collections and are relieved when it turns out that the total losses in the collections, in comparison with the previous year, have increased slightly, but have not doubled” (Barteczko, 1998, p. 24).

The lack of information in Polish university library reports about theft of library materials or user items might suggest that the problem is marginal and of little importance to librarians’ work. However, this is not true, and in some countries theft is cited as one of the main problems hindering librarians’ work and affecting the image of libraries. This is evidenced, for example, by the results of a study conducted by K. Ramesh Dhuri and J. Lobo among university librarians in India. When asked about various acts of vandalism and other undesirable behaviors observed in academic libraries, respondents most frequently cited theft of library materials (90% of responses). Behaviors such as damaging books and tearing out pages, drawing on pages, rearranging collections, late return of borrowed materials, and damaging library furniture were listed next (Ramesh Dhuri & Lobo, 2021).

TECHNICAL SUPPORT – ELECTROMAGNETIC AND RADIO SYSTEMS

When it comes to technology supporting librarians in preventing library theft, the most common technologies mentioned are advanced video surveillance systems and anti-theft devices in the form of magnetic strips and RFID tags. Anti-theft magnetic strips (also known as *Tattletapes*) are an older technology developed by 3M in the late 1960s and early 1970s. A strip that has not been properly deactivated at the lending desk will trigger an alarm upon exiting the library when a book with the strip hidden within it enters the electromagnetic field of the anti-theft gate. RFID tags, on the other hand, began to be used in libraries for managing and protecting library collections three decades later.

Purchasing an RFID system is a significant expense, which, apart from national libraries, only the largest university and public libraries can afford. For example, the purchase and implementation of an RFID system at the Nicolaus Copernicus University Library in Toruń in 2023 cost over PLN 1.2 million (BGUMK Report, 2023, p. 5). Implementing an RFID system at the University of Warsaw Library (BUW) was not much less expensive. Currently, BUW operates a hybrid system – electromagnetic and radio frequency (EM+RFID), as books are still supplied with magnetic strips regardless of RFID tags. At the same time, older books that previously had magnetic strips were retrospectively fitted with RFID tags, as this was the only way to allow older books to be borrowed through the self-service system.

The purchase of the RFID system alone in 2018 cost nearly PLN 320,000 (BUW Report, 2018, p. 56). However, in the same year and in the following years BUW also incurred significant expenses with the purchase of labels and the labeling process itself⁴. In 2018 this expense amounted to as much as PLN 430,000 while in the following year “only” just over PLN 26,000 was allocated for this purpose (BUW Report, 2019, p. 78), but in 2020 labeling costs were again significant, exceeding PLN 96,000 (BUW Report, 2020, p. 76). In 2021–2022, the cost of supplying books with security elements was also significant, amounting to PLN 38,000 (BUW Report, 2021, p. 72) and PLN 43,000 (BUW Report, 2022, p. 81) respectively. Only in 2023 were these costs lower, amounting to less than PLN 3,000 (BUW Report, 2023, p. 81). It is true that the BUW report provides in this category the total amount allocated for marking library materials with magnetic strips and RFID tags, but due to the fact that RFID tags intended for securing books

⁴ It is worth noting that the RFID system was implemented at the University of Warsaw Library (BUW) in 2018, and from August of that year, when RFID labels began being placed in books, nearly 130,000 volumes were marked with RFID by the end of that year (BUW Report 2018, p. 24). The following year, over 220,000 volumes were marked with RFID (BUW Report 2019, p. 40). Full implementation of the RFID system, along with the selection of collections for open access labeling, was completed in 2020.

are twice as expensive as magnetic strips it can be assumed that the cost of labeling with RFID tags constituted 2/3 of the above amounts⁵. The average price of a single magnetic strip ranges from 0.50 to 0.70 PLN per unit, although it can be lower for larger orders. It also depends on whether they are single-sided B1 strips (adhesive tape is on one side and is applied to the spines of hardcover books using special applicators called bayonets) or the slightly more expensive double-sided B2 strips, with adhesive tape on both sides, allowing the strip to be placed deep within the book's block between pages. Meanwhile, the price of an average RFID tag depends on the frequency to which its antenna responds. More efficient tags, placed in books and operating at the high UHF frequency, can cost over 2 PLN per unit.

The introduction of an RFID system at the University of Warsaw Library has allowed inventory checks to be conducted more frequently and quickly, rather than every five years. The first inventory using a mobile RFID reader was conducted at the University of Warsaw Library (BUW) in 2020. Data on identified deficiencies reported in subsequent BUW reports can be used as a starting point to determine the scale of collection theft. For subsequent years:

– in 2020, 135,000 volumes were inspected, and 472 absolute deficiencies were identified⁶, which constituted 0.35% of the inspected collections (BUW Report, 2020, p. 34);

– in 2021, a total of 151,000 monographs were inspected and 469 absolute deficiencies were found (0.31%) (BUW Report, 2021, p. 37);

– in 2022, a total of 157,000 monographs were inspected and 441 absolute deficiencies were found (0.28%) (BUW Report, 2022, p. 36);

– in 2023, a total of 104,000 monographs were inspected and 179 absolute deficiencies were found (0.17%) (BUW Report, 2023, p. 47).

The percentage of absolute shortages detected in recent years at the University of Warsaw Library is therefore at an acceptable level, not exceeding 0.5%. If it exceeded 1%, it would be cause for concern, as it would mean that, on average, one book in 100 is missing. It is also worth noting that the percentage of absolute shortages has gradually decreased over the last four reporting years. But the problem lies not only in the scale of

⁵ Among companies supplying libraries with hardware and software supporting collection management and protection, as well as related consumables, the price difference between magnetic strips and RFID tags can be even greater. This depends, among other things, on whether the tags offered are active (with their own power sources) or passive (in which case the transponder uses the reader's energy), and on the transponder's operating frequency. The price of inter-page magnetic strips used at the University of Warsaw Library in 2025 is PLN 0.31 gross per unit, while the price of RFID tags (49x81 mm) is PLN 0.64 gross per unit.

⁶ Relative shortages identified during the inspection are those recorded for the first time, assuming that such materials may still be found. Absolute shortages are those identified again, meaning that the missing materials are considered irretrievably lost.

this phenomenon; it should also be considered from the perspective of the value of the stolen materials. The theft of, say, ten contemporary academic textbooks, which can be somehow reconstructed in the collection, is one thing, but the theft of a single rare book, not necessarily a manuscript or incunabulum, but even from the first half of the 20th century, for which finding an equivalent can be time-consuming and expensive, is another.

Compared to barcode systems, placing RFID tags on books is undoubtedly a significant advancement in facilitating collection management – keeping records of loans and returns, conducting inventory, and, above all, checking at the library's exit gates. However, the question arises as to whether RFID tags (also known as RFID markers or transponders) provide greater protection for books marked with them. On the one hand, the answer is clearly affirmative, as the RFID system will raise an alarm if an attempt is made to remove a document from the library without being checked out. On the other hand, RFID tags are just as susceptible to destruction or removal as barcode labels or magnetic strips. Bartłomiej Gładysz and Paweł Wiśniewski are unequivocal on this issue, stating: "It should be noted that RFID is not primarily an anti-theft technology, and if a user deliberately tries to remove an unborrowed book, neither RFID, barcodes, nor magnetic strips can prevent this" (Gładysz & Wiśniewski 2015).

That is why it is so important that all such anti-theft measures be placed on books and book blocks so that they are difficult to find and remove. Thieves are quite clever and inventive in this regard. One original idea is to swap barcode stickers. Gregory Seppi and Dainan Skeem described one such case in which a thief stole books approved for outside lending, but had no intention of returning them to the library. Broadly speaking, this method involves gently removing barcodes from the borrowed materials after borrowing them, returning to the library, and pasting these codes onto other similar books in the library's collection. They can then go to the lending library and fictitiously "return" the books to the library, so that a return receipt is recorded, but in reality, they aren't returning the books, just their barcodes attached to other books (Seppi & Skeem, 2020, pp. 103-104).

At the University of Warsaw Library, acts of vandalism involving the removal or destruction of RFID tags and magnetic strips also occur. However, the magnetic strip has the advantage that, if cut in half, it can still activate the anti-theft gate. Finding a magnetic strip, which is quite small, used to be easier. Older books are equipped with strips made of transparent foil. This makes the metal strip easier to see. Newer strips, which the University of Warsaw Library's Collections Department places in books, are on paper. This allows the magnetic strip to blend into the background of the book's page and makes it more difficult to

locate. However, this doesn't guarantee the book's complete security. A determined and patient criminal who decides to damage or remove the security element from a book can do just that. Employees of the Circulation Department at the University of Warsaw Library say that they find books from which the magnetic strip or label has not necessarily been brutally torn out or cut out, but rather where such elements have been slowly and gently removed, leaving almost no trace. It sometimes happened that the labels or strips were found in trash bins, but it was also possible that a strip removed from one book was glued to another. Several books a month are thus re-labeled, but it is important to remember that this only applies to books where the security elements were found to have been removed. Therefore, it is difficult to determine the scale of this practice. Older books were labeled under the spine. Currently, the University of Warsaw Library doesn't use spine labels, but only ones between the pages.

THE INTERNAL ENEMY

Efforts to prevent attempted theft and destruction of library collections are primarily aimed at deterring outsiders who may attempt to use the collections in violation of library regulations and in an illegal manner. However, when establishing access procedures to certain parts of the collection, especially special collections, it is necessary to consider limiting this access for certain employees. It is not uncommon for library thefts to be committed by employees themselves, including those with the highest privileges. F. Trzebski refers to such cases as "employee crime", stating that "the internal thief is the most dangerous type of criminal" (Trzebski, 2020, p. 137). The question may therefore arise as to whether anti-theft gates should also be installed at entrances/exits used exclusively by library employees, thus following the principle of "everyone is a suspect". The answer should be affirmative, because, as Piotr Ogrodzki once wrote, "employee theft" is the most dangerous form of theft of library collections (Ogrodzki, 2003). The University of Warsaw Library can be cited as an example. In addition to two gates for entry and exit for readers, there is also one gate installed at the entrance/exit exclusively for staff and one gate at the entrance/exit to the underground garage. A review of the study conducted by Todd Samuelson, Laura Sare, and Catherine Coker states that the majority of internal thefts (69%) are committed by people working in the library but not strictly speaking librarians. This includes support staff, temporary workers, student volunteers, security guards, and so on. As the authors state, this is little consolation, considering that 31% of insider thefts are committed by employees with professional status as librarians, including top-level employees (Samuelson, Sare & Coker, 2012, p. 565).

TECHNICAL SUPPORT – VIDEO MONITORING

In large libraries, such as national libraries and larger university and public libraries, surveillance of the library interior using a camera system takes place practically throughout the entire building, though particularly in critical areas such as the special collections reading rooms and the library entrance. Although perhaps the word “video recording” should be used instead of “observation”. Technology has advanced significantly in this regard. I remember at the turn of 1990/91, a monitoring system was installed in the old building of the University of Warsaw Library, in its main reading room, to support staff in monitoring the situation in the reading room. One camera was installed in each of the three rooms in the main reading room. To cover the entire room, the cameras were placed quite high. The cameras were static, the image resolution was low (HD was, of course, not yet an option for such applications), and needless to say, the image was black and white. In short, the possibility of observing any unusual behavior of individual readers in detail was limited. The center of this system was located in the largest room, at the librarian’s station which provided materials from the reference collection. This center was simply a monitor no larger than 10 inches, connected to a VCR with VHS tapes. This was intended to record events in the reading room—of course, not simultaneously from all cameras, only from a selected camera. However, in practice, it wasn’t used that way. To record images from just one camera throughout the entire reading room’s working day, one would have to use four VHS E-180 cassette tapes, remembering to replace them every three hours. In this situation, long-term archiving of recorded material was out of the question. And yet, it is not just about real-time viewing, but also about long-term archiving of recordings. It happens, not only in action movie scripts, that the police or other authorities request access to surveillance footage, which allows them to identify individuals suspected of committing criminal acts. The condition of such a situation is, of course, not only that the recording itself be made, but also that the perpetrator of the offense can be identified based on the recording. Modern surveillance systems make this much easier.

One of the key elements of installing a video surveillance system is arranging the area under surveillance and recording so that the camera image shows what the user is doing with the document placed on the table in front of them, not their back. Simultaneous observation of images from multiple cameras to catch potential criminals in the act would be quite difficult. Video surveillance systems are therefore designed to have a significant psychological impact. A criminal doesn’t know if someone is watching them while performing a prohibited act, but they must be aware that the image from this camera and all others within the library is

recorded and then archived for at least several weeks, allowing them to determine the time of the crime and identify the suspect. As G. Seppi and D. Skeem note, “cameras are most often useful after the theft has already occurred” (Seppi & Skeem, 2020, p. 109).

Of course, the installation of a surveillance camera system should be appropriately marked to protect users’ images. The American Association of Academic and Research Libraries (ACRL) Special Collections Protection Guidelines state that libraries “should post information about video surveillance at the entrance to monitored areas and publish this information online as part of general information for users” (ACRL/RBMS Guidelines, 2009, rev. 2023).

Six cameras are installed in the largest reading area of the University of Warsaw Library, the lobby (103 stationary seats and 18 seats on movable “bar stools” directly next to the shelves)⁷. These are older generation CCTV (Closed Circuit Television) cameras, operating on coaxial cables and installed when the new University Library building was completed, a quarter of a century ago. Just because there are only six cameras and they are of an older type doesn’t mean they don’t primarily serve their “deterrent” function. The tables in this large room are arranged so that all users face one direction. Therefore, four cameras capture images showing users from the front, while two cameras capture their backs. The angle of the four front cameras also allows those working in individual work booths located above the reading room to be in view. There are no “blind spots” in the reading room where someone could try to hide from the camera, intending to engage in prohibited activities. Even if the distance from the furthest workstation to the camera facing that direction is approximately twenty meters, the mere knowledge that a camera is constantly recording the image from that workstation can deter potential offenders from committing an offense. Furthermore, the furthest workstation from the front cameras is also the closest to the cameras at the back. Therefore, the sense of “surveillance” only increases. However, this “deterrent” effect would certainly be improved if there were more cameras in other reading areas and their placement provided greater coverage. One example is the eastern room with library and information science periodicals, adjacent to the main reading area and with 55 seats available to readers. However, the activities undertaken here are recorded by only three cameras, one of which does not actually show the reading room seats because it is directed towards the restrooms. As a result, the remaining two cameras do not provide full coverage of this space. There are at least a few blind spots.

⁷ The architectural design of the University of Warsaw Library includes approximately 1,000 seats for readers. More than half of these seats are located in 10 reading rooms with at least 20 seats each (Grygowski, 2020, p. 22).

However, it should be clarified that both the first and second examples refer to reading areas within the free-access area. When it comes to the room functioning on the same level as a de facto reading room, with full librarian service and the ability to order materials from the library's storage room, the differences are significant. There are only ten seats for readers, but above them, literally above their heads, are a staggering nineteen cameras. Of these, sixteen are modern IP cameras, meaning they use the Internet Protocol (IP) which can be controlled via the Internet or at least via the LAN's Intranet. They operate on UTP (Unshielded Twisted Pair) cables, transmitting color images in HD resolution and switching to infrared recording in darkness. The remaining three cameras are older CCTV devices. Such "camera coverage" of a relatively small space may seem overly cautious, but years of practice and sometimes difficult experience prove P. Ogrodzki's claim that library reading rooms are places particularly vulnerable to criminal activity, as a potential robber:

- receives items ordered from librarians,
- has the opportunity to calmly (multiple times) check the book (its condition, contents, number of engravings, etc.),
- can recognize the habits of library staff and assess whether their behavior gives rise to the possibility of theft" (Ogrodzki, 2003).

In the control room there are a dozen or so monitors, each divided into a dozen or so smaller screens. Effective monitoring can be difficult for the average person to maintain when staring at a single monitor with sixteen windows in a 4x4 arrangement. However, with sixteen monitors, each displaying images from sixteen cameras, staring at 256 small screens is pointless, as such monitoring is practically impossible. Security personnel can, in some situations, select a specific camera and display it on the entire monitor screen, but then they temporarily lose the view from the other cameras. Therefore, the security officer on duty in the control room isn't tasked with constantly staring at a wall of monitors. An academic library is after all no Fort Knox. This confirms the general opinion about complex video surveillance systems: they are most often not used for real-time response, but primarily for recording events and possibly delayed playback of recorded material. This is where the issue of archiving recordings arises. Because video files in satisfactory resolution take up a relatively large amount of disk space (in HD quality, an hour of recording will take up several GB of memory), camera recordings are not archived for long periods; they are instead overwritten by newer recordings. At the University Library, such temporary archiving lasts 2-3 weeks, meaning that the detection of a prohibited act should be confirmed relatively quickly if the camera recordings are to be used in investigations.

CLASSIC ENTRANCE CHECKS

After the tragic events in May 2025 on the main campus of the University of Warsaw⁸, management decided that security staff on duty at the library entrance were required to check the bags and briefcases of library visitors (BUW – Circular Letter No. 2/2025). Many years ago, when I had the opportunity to participate in a tour of research libraries in Germany with a group of Polish librarians, one of the images I remember vividly was the situation at the Deutsche Bücherei in Leipzig. At the library entrance, an employee dressed in a uniform reminiscent of previous centuries greeted entering users, which was quite charming. And because of his elaborate attire, it also had an air of dignity about it. However, at the same time, this employee was checking the contents of the hand luggage of those entering the library, which had nothing to do with dignity. A similar scene occurred later at the British Library in London, where uniformed personnel also inspected the contents of people’s bags entering the library. However, the London situation could be explained by general security concerns, as it was still a time of heightened IRA activity. I noticed these incidents because I had previously worked at the University of Warsaw Library, in its central location, the main reading room. At that time, reading room staff had never inspected the contents of users’ bags. The reason was simple: no bags, briefcases, backpacks, etc., were allowed into the reading room. Any readers who intended to do so were asked to return to the cloakroom and leave their hand luggage there. There were readers who initially declared they would be happy to show the contents of their backpacks upon leaving, but this was not permitted. This was a time when students with laptops were still a rarity, so entering the library with just a library card, pen, notebook, and perhaps their own book wasn’t logistically complicated. Nowadays, when a student entering the library has to carry a laptop, possibly with a power adapter and cable, a notebook, a smartphone, and a bottle of water, it seems more cumbersome. That is why, for years, it has been possible to enter the library with small hand luggage, such as a backpack or laptop bag, without any inspection. And now, after years of experience, baggage inspection has been introduced. However, it is worth noting that hand luggage is checked almost exclusively at the library entrance; no one checks it when a user leaves the library, even though the aforementioned circular from the director states that the contents of briefcases, bags, and backpacks must be presented to security “each time before entering and upon leaving BUW” (BUW – Order Regulations, 2025). Clearly, this inspection isn’t intended to protect the library’s collections or

⁸ On May 7, 2025, a University of Warsaw student attacked and fatally wounded a female administrative staff member. He also wounded two security personnel who came to her aid.

detect attempted theft. Rather, it is primarily for user safety and to prevent users from bringing dangerous items into the library.

Library regulations often specify that access to the library is permitted only after leaving outerwear, such as a coat, jacket, or overcoat, in the cloakroom. Clearly, this is intended to prevent insubordinate users from easily hiding books, especially smaller books, in the capacious pockets of such clothing. As E. Barteczko, quoted earlier, wrote based on the experiences of the National Library in Warsaw: "Reading room staff are very reluctant to add small-format books to the collections, as they disappear immediately" (Barteczko, 1998, p. 26).

NOT ONLY COLLECTIONS ARE PREY TO LIBRARY THIEVES

The problem of theft in libraries extends beyond library collections to any items that might attract the attention of potential thieves. This applies not only to library property, but also to items belonging to library users. Library visitors, especially those using the reading room, sometimes carelessly leave their property behind and wander away from their seats for extended periods. Items such as laptops, mice, tablets, but also backpacks, bags, and even library cards or prepaid photocopy and print cards, if left unattended, can become targets for thieves. I have often seen students at the University of Warsaw Library (BUW) wandering away for extended periods, leaving their laptops on tables as well as smartphones or Bluetooth headphones charging. This is likely driven by the belief that nothing bad can happen because the building is monitored. However, the fact is that most of the spaces occupied by readers at BUW are not monitored by video surveillance, and even in those reading areas where cameras are present, there are also so-called blind spots. Video surveillance cameras at BUW are located in circulation routes and reading areas with a capacity of between a dozen and several dozen, but in the spaces popular with students, integrated into open-access shelves, there is no video surveillance. Therefore, users should first be made aware of this and encouraged to take greater care of the security of their items and only then rely on technological support. As it turns out, this phenomenon can be combated with relatively simple methods, not necessarily involving advanced technology. Heidi Simmons, among others, has written about this, citing the solutions implemented at the McGill University Library in Montreal, where laptop thefts were the primary focus. One idea was to place a notice at the library entrance with information about laptop thefts and a warning. Periodic announcements were also made over the library's public address system advising users to secure their property. Additionally, security staff left notes on tables where equipment and other

valuables had been left unattended, warning them not to do so. This, of course, served not only as a warning to careless users but also to potential thieves, informing them that the workstation was under surveillance. As H. Simmons writes, the results were excellent in a short time and using simple methods, as no more laptop thefts were recorded in the library in the following academic year (Simmons, 2018, p. 282).

Although the literature suggests that the main entrance to the library is a critical location for detecting attempted thefts, cases of book theft using other routes cannot be ruled out. A simple and rather brazen idea, for example, is to throw books out the library window for the thief's accomplices to retrieve. Such situations would be possible in smaller libraries, where users could open windows undetected. However in large, modern libraries with automatic ventilation systems and an interior monitored by cameras and security personnel, opening windows on your own would be highly suspicious, if even possible at all. Therefore, the main entrance to the library should be a place under special surveillance. A system monitoring the flow of materials at the main entrance to the library using RFID technology must, of course, be supported by librarians or security personnel on duty nearby. This would be pointless if the system signaled an unauthorized attempt to remove undecoded materials from the library when no one was nearby to respond appropriately.

The anti-theft system in the form of gates that respond to unauthorized attempts to remove library materials is primarily intended to act as a deterrent. There's no point in deluding yourself into thinking that library thieves operate so unprofessionally that their nefarious activities risk triggering the alarm system. While some unwise thieves do get caught at the gates, it is rare. BUW staff once told me about someone who triggered the alarm system while leaving the library. She explained that she wasn't taking any books from the library, but only had a stack of copies made on the library copier. Upon closer inspection, it was discovered that one of these "copies" had a magnetic strip attached to it, and as we know, copiers don't apply magnetic strips themselves. Such bizarre cases, however, are rare. If the system responds with an audible signal, the reaction of both parties – the alleged "perpetrator" and security—is usually calm, as the initial thought is of a misunderstanding. Companies that install RFID-based anti-theft systems in libraries also offer the option of automatically locking doors when an alarm is triggered. The University of Warsaw Library hasn't installed this, but no one has the intention of running away or of chasing down another in such situations.

It is possible that the system will work properly and signal an attempt to remove a book from the library that actually passed through the lending library. This happened to me once, even though I had confirmation of the checkout on my receipt from the lending library. Security asked me to

return to the lending library and ask for the book to be decoded again. It is clear that such situations aren't uncommon, as the security staff's reaction was rather indifferent. Patrick Charles attributes such situations to lax procedures in sensitizing/desensitizing library materials during loan registration, or a possible IT system error (Charles, 2017, p. 49). It is possible, of course, for the system to work flawlessly and respond with a visual and audible signal when someone unknowingly, perhaps absentmindedly, removes an undecoded library book along with their own collection. No staff member makes a big deal about it, as anyone can be distracted. The mistake is quickly resolved, and the "unlucky" person is left momentarily confused. Unless, of course, security decides there was no mistake and the attempt to remove the book was deliberate. Even then, it is not usually considered a criminal offense. The matter will be considered a minor offense, which, of course, won't result in calling the police or filing a lawsuit. Initially, many libraries offer less drastic but decisive action against those who break the rules and regulations, such as suspending the user's library card for at least a specified period and banning the individual from access. For example, the Canadian Urban Libraries Council (CULC) guide to safety and security in public libraries provides detailed and exemplary guidelines for suspending users, applicable suspension periods, and formalities for potential appeals (CULC/CBUC, 2023).

The University of Warsaw Library's regulations also provide for the possibility of refusing access to the library to individuals who fail to comply with the rules, including those attempting to remove books from the library without recording this in the loan register. For example, in the "Regulations for Access to the Collections of the University of Warsaw Library", which is an annex to the regulation of the Rector of the University of Warsaw of June 2, 2020, regarding the Regulations of the University of Warsaw Library and Information System, Chapter VI, § 16 states:

6. Removing items owned by the University of Warsaw Library outside its premises without completing the applicable formalities, damaging them, or failing to comply with generally accepted norms of social coexistence constitutes a violation of these Regulations.

7. Violations of the Regulations will result in:

- 1) a request to immediately leave the University of Warsaw Library;
 - 2) temporary or indefinite deprivation of library card privileges;
 - 3) filing a motion with the appropriate authorities for sanctions".
- (p. 24)

The University of Warsaw Library Regulations, updated in May 2025, also grant security staff the right to deny entry to library users who violate these regulations. Section I.5 of the "Regulations" states: "Library and Security staff have the right and obligation to warn users who violate these

regulations and, in justified cases, deny them access to the University of Warsaw Library premises” (University of Warsaw Library – Regulations, 2025).

It is also possible that the anti-theft system will react to a magnetic strip on a book that actually belongs to another library. Something similar happened to me once. Such alarms are easy to explain; the problem only arises when security staff attempt to pass such “surprise books” over the RFID gate, as this signals to nearby visitors that the anti-theft system is being bypassed.

Anti-theft system alarms can sometimes be false alarms, but it is better to have too many of these than for the system to remain unnecessarily silent. Worse still are cases where the book didn’t actually pass through the lending library or the self-service checkout device, meaning it wasn’t actually decoded, and the anti-theft gate still didn’t respond with a light or sound. This could mean that the magnetic strip or RFID tag (or both) was removed from the book. It is also possible that the system won’t respond because the person attempting theft has used shielding, for example, by wrapping the book in aluminum foil or placing it in a copper box. A University Library employee told me that they tested whether the system would respond when the book was wrapped in foil. It turned out that the system responded, thanks to the dual security of magnetic strips and RFID tags. While RFID tags are technologically more advanced and offer superior functionality to magnetic strips, they are also more susceptible to shielding. Magnetic strips are not only more easily hidden in books, but are also more difficult to sneak out using shielding.

In October 2013, the first conference organized by the European Consortium of Research Libraries (CERL) took place in Poland. It is significant that most of the papers presented during the first session, titled “Stop Thief! Preventing and Investigating Theft from Collections in the Digital Age”, included descriptions of thefts committed in libraries, sometimes brazen but always severe, and descriptions of the investigations conducted (Czapnik, 2013/2014). Meanwhile, it is important for librarians at such conferences not only to share their own theft stories but also to point out to other librarians good, effective, and original solutions that increase the chances of preventing theft.

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