

INTRODUCTION

Library science specialists have long realized that if libraries are to survive, they must be of use to the society and meet its needs and demands. This means that libraries cannot restrict their activity to duties and tasks regulated by their statuses; rather, they must be a site of spontaneous actions, and be prepared to quickly respond to new challenges. Challenges are unprecedented situations which go beyond previous experience. Although they are rare, such challenges may go on for long periods of time and, in the process, completely change our everyday lives. Their roots lie in social, economic, climate, and pandemic crises. Until now, our country had the good fortune to escape such disasters, and thus, we had only second-hand knowledge of challenges they bring.

However, this year and the Covid-19 pandemic brought them to Poland, and forced us to face them. Thus, we devote this special issue of *Library Review* to the functioning of libraries, librarians, and book market in crisis situations. Among contributors there are theorists of library science, as well as librarians.

The discussion opens with a text focused on the crisis of librarianship and its consequences for the society (Jacek Wojciechowski: 'Threats to Libraries'). Professor Wojciechowski directs our attention to the key issue in library operations, not only during the pandemic, but at any time: the necessity of combining print and digital communication, and unmediated interactions with the users – according to Wojciechowski, one should not replace the other. The decision to prioritize either at the expense of the other threatens the users as well as the library's image. To reduce this threat, libraries may extend the range of their services, vary their channels of communication, and adjust them to better perform their functions. As the articles published in this issue show, libraries and librarians made sure to offer multiple channels of communication, particularly during the lockdown.

All articles in this issue presented the activity of libraries in the time of the pandemic, difficult for the directors organizing their activity, as well as for the users themselves.

Librarians from academic and public libraries, as well as the representatives of Polish Librarians' Association, described the initiatives undertaken by these institutions to help the users with accessing the resources of closed libraries, to support the university staff, to acquire and develop skills required for remote work, and to organize the public's free time as well as possible, with cultural institutions closed and events cancelled as a result of lockdown.

The exploration of libraries' pandemic activity opens with 'The National Library of Poland During the Coronavirus Pandemic: A Brief History of the First Nine Months of the State of Emergency' by Tomasz Makowski, director of the National Library. Doctor Makowski gave an account of the multiple roles the library played during the on-going pandemic. Their goal was to provide the users and staff of the NL with safe access to the unparalleled resource that are national library's collections. Furthermore, as the central library of the country, the NL prepared recommendations and guidelines for over 30,000 Polish libraries, supporting the institutions incurring losses and suggesting methods of coping with these new challenges.

'Academic Libraries in Unusual Situations' by Anna Wołodko, director of Warsaw University Library, showed how academic libraries function in unprecedented situations, with Warsaw University Library as a case study. Director Wołodko pointed out that university libraries should be accustomed to changes, as it is their regular practice to accommodate a new group of users arriving every academic year with new attitudes and habits, to meet their demands and to satisfy their needs regarding channels of communication, as well as modes and methods of work.

Bożena Jaskowska, director of the Library of Rzeszów University (author of 'Organizational Flexibility of Academic Libraries in a VUCA reality; the example of the functioning of libraries during the Covid-19 epidemic') presented management solutions implemented at academic libraries under the volatile and unpredictable conditions described as VUCA (Volatility; Uncertainty; Complexity; Ambiguity), focusing on libraries' responses to the first phase of the lockdown imposed as the result of Covid-19, which lasted from 12th of March to early June 2020. The basis of the study was an online survey that Director Jaskowska carried out among the directors of Polish academic libraries. It bears repeating that hers was the first study of library activity during the lockdown.

Anna Wałek, director of Gdańsk University of Technology Library (author of 'Polish Academic Libraries in the Face of the Covid-19 Pandemic: Crisis Management and Communication within the Organisation') analysed the impact of the pandemic on the activity of universities and university libraries. The pandemic made it necessary to rapidly reorganise the work of libraries and their staff, to change the tools used in service pro-

vision and adjust the format of those services, to purchase the equipment required to ensure personal safety of the staff, and to organize a system for remote work. These needs informed the management decisions made during the crisis, under the conditions of anxiety and insufficient communication.

The article of Anna Grzecznowska, 'Initiatives of the Polish Librarians' Association for the Libraries and Users in the First Phase of the Pandemic' presented the actions PLA undertook for the benefit of librarians and libraries, particularly public libraries, which supported local communities in the first phase of the pandemic. PLA, the leading organization for librarians in Poland, supported library staff in two areas: communication with users, and development of skills required to provide remote services. Grzecznowska showed how the pandemic affected the services offered by libraries and explained how PLA's initiatives extended the availability of online resources and e-services, as and increased librarians' competencies in the area of virtual communication with users.

In the following article, Łukasz Wojciechowski from the Faculty of Administration and Social Sciences of the Higher School of Economics and Innovation (WSEI) in Lublin ('The Implementation of Online Training for Library Employees as an Activity Increasing Competencies in the Promotion of Culture on the Internet'), reminded us that libraries, as cultural institutions, play a special role in providing access to information and organizing cultural events. He emphasized that this task is especially important in local communities outside large urban centres. The article discussed various training programmes designed to increase librarians' competences in the area of promoting culture online, such as online courses, with particular attention paid to the distinction between synchronous and asynchronous training.

The pandemic impacted book market as well as libraries. Jerzy Leszek Okuniewski, Vice-President of the management board of wholesale-retail company Książnica Polska (The Polish Book Store), shared his remarks on the state of Polish book market. He began his discussion with a claim that, while print is one of the most important means of communicating thought and knowledge, as well as a basis of social bonds, economically speaking, the importance of print is marginal – globally, and in individual countries. Book market has many problems: there is no fixed book price, as the bill introducing fixed prices still has not been passed; sales are declining; readership is falling; the book stores are failing. The pandemic only exacerbated the situation. Furthermore, publishers, retail owners, and wholesalers have noted a significant decline in sales since the beginning of lockdown, which brought closures and a ban on events (such as book fairs, which had to be cancelled), as well as a drastic decline of publishing activity.

The issue concludes with a review of the newest Polish scholarship in the field of library science, published between 2019 and 2020 (Barbara Koryś, 'A Review of Domestic Publications').

The pandemics rages on; as the number of cases rises and falls, libraries close to the public and reopen again. The number of economic sectors suffering from the impact of the pandemic is rising; culture and education sectors are among them. It is necessary that the public knows the value of open libraries and their collections, and, more generally, that it recognizes the benefits of reading. It is highly likely that the library closure and limited access to print will have a negative impact on the state of learning, which informs our psychological experiences as well as our social life; we may well see our previous achievements in this area fade away.

In his thought-provoking text, Ryszard Robert Gajewski recalled the expression of Seneca the Younger: 'Fortune is of sluggish growth, but ruin is rapid.'¹ Gajewski applied the concept of 'Seneca effect,' developed by Ugo Bardi, to the state of higher education in Poland during the pandemic, showing how the period of lockdown left the system eroded, and describing the factors that contributed to the process. According to Gajewski, they included "digital dementia, caused by uncontrolled use of digital media."² He clarified that "the phenomenon is particularly dangerous to children and youth, whose brains are more plastic and absorb external stimuli like a sponge. Excessive use of technological gadgets may cause difficulties with independent thinking, impair children's ability to communicate and think in abstract terms, decrease the strength of their memory, shorten their attention span, lead to a deficit in their spatial orientation ability, and cause serious problems with learning. Adults may struggle with memory and focus."³

Therefore, actions undertaken by librarians and booksellers to promote reading are incredibly valuable; as is prof. Jacek Wojciechowski's suggestion that libraries switch to multi-communication mediation and thus reduce the negative impact of technology described by Gajewski. After all, we are responsible for the education of youth who are our future, and for the quality of every Polish citizen's life, to which books and print are absolutely critical.

Although the crisis brought on by the pandemic severely limited human contact and the activity of various institutions – cultural institutions among them – it also spurred people on to cultivate their bonds with

¹ R.R. Gajewski: *Edukacja pandemiczna: Lessons learned*. „Informatyka w Edukacji” T.XVII, 2020 <https://iwe.mat.umk.pl/iwe20/tom-iwe2020/27.pdf>

² R.R. Gajewski: *Edukacja pandemiczna: Lessons learned*. „Informatyka w Edukacji” T.XVII, 2020, s. 6.

³ R.R. Gajewski: *Edukacja pandemiczna: Lessons learned*. „Informatyka w Edukacji” T.XVII, 2020, s. 6-7. <https://iwe.mat.umk.pl/iwe20/tom-iwe2020/27.pdf>

others, to stimulate their minds, to exercise their creativity – and to promote books and reading.

We may find hope in the initiatives of private business owners such as the manager of Big Book Cafe in Warsaw, which gives customers access to a collection of books, organizes literary events, and helps the local community to cope with the lockdown by running a book club and offering reading recommendations.

We should remember the lessons our community learned in this crisis, which has affected libraries as well as book market. We learned new things about ourselves: we learned what we should avoid, what we may yet improve. The experiences we have gained may inspire us to change our routines, and become the first step towards further actions: thus, we may prepare ourselves to meet new challenges that may come our way.

I believe that the initiatives presented in this issue will inspire others who wish to stop, or at least, to slow down the Seneca effect. The articles gathered here present the crisis situation as an opportunity to seek new solutions, better suited to meet the needs of the public, and as a chance to develop a sense of responsibility for the society in which we live.

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