

Free Access to Information and Knowledge or Educational Exclusion? World's Trends versus Poland

The purpose of this article is to determine if Poland is truly open and has free access to information and knowledge in comparison to the world. Do we have a chance to build a society of knowledge with the present level of electronic communication we have? Aren't we working on independently of the rest of the world? Aren't we working on our exclusion from the rest of the world? To answer these questions we should analyze the access to information both its source and contents and compare Poland's accessibility to the rest of the world [1].

First Poland is not a country, which has put the emphasis on new technologies in its strategic education development; however politicians are quick to speak but they only provide lips services to those issues when in fact their words rarely turn into action. It seems that as the member of European Union we will not follow Irish or Finnish way with the priorities on education and technology, but we will rather occupy some place in the end of this line like Greece, overeating the Union's funds or investing inconsistently with the world's newest trends. Witold Gadomski, one of the *Gazeta Wyborcza* journalists, used to write that for the EU the most important goal is to win the technological race with the USA and for the EU new members, to catch up with the 'old' fifteen EU countries [2]. So called 'Lisbon strategy' supposes some solutions in this matter. Such thinking is quite disturbing as turns into a particular contest between two or even three parts of the world, which instead of joining the nations can divide them into those with the access to information and technology and those excluded from it.

The matter of digital exclusion has been the subject of many public forums. Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, on the conference World Summit on the Information Society in Geneva (10-12 December 2003) had a speech about the most important problems to face "*The Net World Order: Bridging the Global Digital Divide*". He expresses his anxiety to a development distance, which divides the USA from the rest countries of the world and the digital exclusion or digital divide. Thanks to us, the distance can deepen or lessen, which will determine the future ways for certain countries and societies. The ONZ summit was to show the ways to follow, included in (Geneva Plan of Action), which are to fulfill the declaration in (Declaration of Principals) of the most important principles promoting new technologies and the access to knowledge and counteracting the digital exclusion at the same time. During the summit in Geneva, on 11th December 2003, the representative of Polish government, prof. dr hab. Michał Kleiber, the Minister of Scientific Research and Information of Poland presented the Polish standpoint in this matter: *The development of the Information Society in Poland is supported by the government strategy called 'e-Polska' emphasizing:*

- Infrastructure development IT
- Increase of digital content, especially in Polish language
- Information technology education
- Providing e-government services for citizens and businesses
- Promoting the development of e-commerce, e-learning and e-health. [...]

Secretary General, concluding: *I would like to declare a full support for all actions taken for developing the world's information society, on behalf of my country. We become aware of this idea as the natural way of social development, which in long-term time increases the quality of living for all people and provides higher and higher level of civil and economic development. This is our main goal.*

Lots of the Minister's declarations remain still on the paper only, especially the one concerning: **the increase of digital content, especially in Polish language.** Librarians are not familiar with Polish scientific databases, which is of huge importance for Polish science but which is neither being built nor financed. They rarely get finances for the central library catalogue NUKAT or for financing the access to electronic periodicals, not mentioning the money needed for building the scientific databases or making digital copies of earlier publications. Poland does not have a similar institution to that of British JISC, which would coordinate the creation of the scientific electronic sources or the access to it for all the institutions in the country.

Polish system of financing education is not flexible enough. It has become obvious that people who are responsible for sharing meager sums of money don't transfer the funds to building Poland's scientific content; when year after years applying for finances aids for the development of databases and Poland intellectual properties we continuously get turn down.

The Directors of the academic libraries have lost their hope for improving the situation of financing innovative projects. On the whole, librarians are not considered as partners in building the information society. We were convinced about it by a campaign for adding the libraries to the *e-Polska* strategy and by the bureaucratic realization of Polish Internet Library system. The Wielkopolska Digital Library – one of the more successful project in this discipline – is based on a work of a group of determined librarians, information technologists and scientists from Poznań, who do what they can to make a professional platform for the storing and collecting of information. They couldn't manage to get finances for developing this technology. We haven't got the e-prints' repositories cause our scientific personnel's consciousness about a free access to their scientific achievements is low. We suffer from lack of knowledge about the world's initiatives like: Open Archives Initiative or Open Access Initiative.

Open Archives Initiative and Open Access Initiative

Open Archives Initiative, in the early 90s in the USA gave rise in people's heads, who treat the old idea about their products of their heads with due respect and follow it according to the progress and once own right to education and information. This is one of those initiatives, which treat the Internet and the flow of information as a chance for even quicker development of the whole world – preserving the quality of the information and knowledge – not as a threat to the world. Peter Suber, who

compiled the chronology of events connected with the OAI movement comes back to the 60s <http://ebib.oss.wroc.pl/2005/63/kalendarium.php> when educational information centers ERIC and MEDLINE were set up in the USA, to show how long these matters have been taken into consideration.

The Open Access Initiative tradition originates from building the first in the world open archives of electronic documents: e-prints – called - Open Archives Initiative. They were to advance the flow of information between scientists, especially in: mathematics, physics, computer technology, medicine or chemistry. Their main goal was to give an open, free of charge and most of all quick access to knowledge. The archives of this kind started to seriously develop in the USA and the Western Europe. Today, the continuation of Open Archives Initiative is the initiative, which is officially called: Open Access Initiative (OAI). Its main aim is opening electronic archives, more economic publishing of science works and make them available to public for free on the Internet [3]. It is of huge importance to develop and promote the change of the consciousness of the people in this matter.

In the past, the mechanism of filling the repositories used to select the deposits' authors only. The authors used to decide themselves whether the electronic versions of their works were to be stored in certain archives. An easy interface allows quick browsing such a database. However, the matters of repositories are not in order to the end up till now, the fact that a huge grass roots scientific initiative of international scale occurred is quite important, which groups people having the same matter to be solved and the results of their lobbying are seen in the European Commission's decisions as well as the decisions of some other countries' governments e.g. in the USA or in the UK. Thanks to that initiative many electronic databases, archives were established, providing the latest knowledge for thousands of librarians searching for the info for their library users [4].

European politics and access to knowledge

The EU politics of expenses, according to the *Lisbon strategy* (however, inconsistent and without the same extermination as in the USA), will change towards financing knowledge and science development in the coming years, which is visible looking at the new EU budget plans on years 2007-2013. Serious discussions about the access to knowledge are nowadays taking place among decision-makers and scientists in Europe. An important debate lead during a conference (organized by Max Planck Institute) in Berlin: Conference on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities 20-22 October 2003, <http://www.zim.mpg.de/openaccess-berlin>, finished with a common declaration, clearly describing the goals scientific world should reach [5]. The chiefs of many important institutions and organizations signed the declaration, but on the list of all signatories <http://www.zim.mpg.de/openaccess-berlin/signatories.html> there is not even one Polish institution.

In Brussels on 15th July 2004, the European Commission published a document titled: „An effective scientific publishing system for European research” <http://europa.eu.int/comm/research/press/2004/pr1506en.cfm>, which announced the research on economic and technical evolution connected with scientific publications market. The results of this research are to be announced in 2005. The Commission refers to a public debate in this document on Open Access Initiative and Berlin Declaration,

which underlines the threat connected with limiting the access to knowledge and the growth of prices the societies must pay for the limited access to licensed journals platforms. The scientific publication was handed over to powerful publishers, who hike prices to unimaginable amounts. Less and less libraries in Europe can afford to pay subscriptions to scientific materials, which after all are created and written on our universities. The main idea about disinterested exchange of gifts among scientists in the past was lost and forgotten. In the past, the library used to purchase a periodical, put it on the shelf and allowed everybody to use it as long and as many times as needed. Today, the commercial publishers, who invested in a digital copy of an item, want constant profits from that. Didn't we go too far with commercialism? If we leave the initiative on the publishers' side only, we will cause that the access to knowledge will become luxurious and only for the chosen ones. Is that what we are aiming for?

The British Government Report on Scientific Publications – from 2004 says that in the face of bigger and bigger troubles libraries have with supplying them with scientific periodicals, a powerful strategy towards defining the access to knowledge for average people is needed immediately. The report prepared for the government recommends all the scientific institutions, which have a publishing production, to set repositories of their texts and give a free access to them. The subsidizing institutions, which spend public money on producing knowledge, can demand from authors receiving money to leave the copies of their works in repositories. The Government should nominate the institution to supervise the whole process. The costs of creating repositories are not that high but there are some costs. In the first period the model, in which “the authors should pay for publishing their works”, is recommended. The money needed for that would be distributed through institutions and education supporting funds. As it is going to be experimental, difficult to fulfill, the report suggests a government strategy to be quickly prepared. The process of archiving such an electronic content is expensive. British Library as a national library of Great Britain should receive extra money for this purpose only. The report mentions also about the new rules according to the deposit copy of electronic documents.

Last February 2005 at the University of Southampton in England, the third conference took place: Berlin 3 Open Access *Progress in Implementing the Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities* <http://www.eprints.org/berlin3/outcomes.html>, during which ready solutions, models, repositories and the politics of individual institutions were presented. Slowly but steadily the way to create open archives, according to law regulations, is being established, which is of huge importance for us.

Open access limitations

Not regulated to the end problems with copyrights in Europe and in the world are worth mentioning as they disturb the development of open archives. The net-users' problems and NAPSTER service show, what can happen to digital libraries if copyrights become more and more restrictive. In reply to the copyrights problems, a non-profit type of institution - **Creative Commons** - was set up in 2001, which aim was to reach a compromise between full copyrights' protection and free access to someone else's production. The main goal for this organization is to create moderate, flexible rules in the face of more and more restricted, implicit principles of copyrights, which make higher and higher barriers for the free flow of information. The founder

and the Chairman of the Board of Directors of Creative Commons is Lawrence Lessig [6]. This initiative appeared to fight with restricted copyrights and to give the alternative ways of copyrights' protection <http://creativecommons.org/about/licenses/>, and to show that it won't be easy to win with big corporations, which see a huge business in possessing knowledge or culture content. The publishers know that developed countries' citizens have more and more money to spend on the products of science or culture, so they might be very good consumers at the same time. If we do not win our rights and guarantee the free access to knowledge, it might find out in several years time that we owe enormous sums of money to huge corporations.

Poland and the access to scientific content

Within law regulations we are prepared to make a free access to information and education available to citizens. Polish Constitution guarantees us a common access to information and education as well as other acts, which promise a lot:

- High Education Act
- Library Act
- The Press Act
- Public Information Act

Written in 'acts' is not enough for an average citizen to have a real access to information and knowledge.

Thanks to EU, Poland has created many strategic documents mainly in purpose to receive money from the EU Structural Funds. Starting from the *National Development Plan* created in 2003 and ending on regional or department strategies like *ePolska*, it seems that on paper we really want to build an Information Society and we really want to invest in education. But there is a long and difficult way from written acts to practice. To understand how to build and what kind of information society should be, we have to realize what in fact we are talking about. As I have already mentioned, Polish society believes that building net and putting some computers in offices is enough to give people the chance to use products of knowledge. In fact it is only the first step to reach the aim, anyway slowly fulfilled by (government projects like: *Internet at Schools, Ikonka*). The second goal – even more important – should be building electronic content: scientific or educational databases electronic journals, digital libraries or repositories. The second goal is still not financed. I still have the impression that information society subject makes our office workers think only about e-government. Where are electronic publications, textbooks for students, bibliographies, libraries', museums' and archives' catalogues or scientific databases? What do we have on the Internet – what hard knowledge representation? Poland has nothing.

We buy the best quality hard knowledge for 'heavy money' from worlds' big publishers, including our scientists' works, published by Springer, Kluwer, Elsevier, Emerald and many other ones. So, if we want to read a good Polish professor's article, we have to pay for it another time as we have already paid for it: paying wages, financing Polish scientific institutions and universities. A good, big academic library spends annually about 2 million zł. on the access to about 16.000 printed and electronic periodicals. There is also a problem with a rational way of spending this money, as we do not have a central institution to negotiate the prices and to impose a rational access to periodicals in the whole country.

Scientific community and a free access to knowledge

One of more important problems we would have to deal with while discussing Open Access Initiative is to convince Polish scientific community to this particular idea. Many of our scientists believe electronic (only on the Internet) publishing as less important not only because of the credit points he/she gets from MNil (Ministry of Research and Information Technology) or because of an *impact factor* of a traditional periodical or because of administrative, inflexible regulations, but also because many of them believe that an article once sent to a publisher can't be put in a repository of his/her own institution. The truth is that it can and should be stored that way. A new Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Springer Science + Business Media – Derk Haank, in the interview for “Information Today” not long ago, said that under public opinion pressure they have changed the politics towards the authors and they allow to put the authors' works on www pages. *Essentially, our policy is the same as that announced recently by Elsevier. Authors can put the corrected version of their own article (their version, not Springer's) either on their own Web site or in their institutional repository. We also require them to put a link back to our PDF file [7].* It's worth to watch the agreements to be signed with the publisher before printing, and make sure it contains a clause leaving us free will in deciding about our own works.

In Poland, everybody thinks that we have a free access to knowledge and nobody is forbidden to use the achievements of science freely, that's why the academic communities take it for granted and don't really discuss an open and free access to knowledge. In spite of the regulations written in Polish Constitution and the successive acts, lack of certain procedures or the Supreme Administrative Court's (NSA) decisions (see: librarians' dispute over a free access to standards – failed) cause that the access to information is difficult and even impossible.

On one hand, there is the government's policy concerning lack of serious decisions and initiatives about free access to knowledge, on the other hand lack of citizens' conscious about the importance of this matter. Up till now, all discussions of making scientific achievements available to public, end with questions: what about COPYRIGHTS and authors' payments? Sometimes we can hear in media that Polish scientists have to sell their manuals to students before making it accessible on the net. Polish research conducted on libraries' users show that the biggest difficulty students have with lack of textbooks. The libraries can offer some 10 textbooks for about 100 students of one year in a certain subject. Repositories of textbooks and digital libraries would save that situation, provided that libraries would be able to get them to be scanned without any limits. The costs of studying for individual students would be much cheaper, not necessarily for the nation.

In Poland similarly like in the world there are two attitudes towards creating the access to knowledge in general: first one – ‘*an opened attitude*’ towards the fact that everybody has the right to have a free access to information and knowledge according to Universal Declaration of Human Rights; second one – ‘*a closed attitude*’ saying that creating knowledge bases is expensive, people should pay for knowledge and everybody has the right to get profits from their scientific works. The second attitude is represented by some of scientists and librarians as well. However, the biggest world's library organizations like IFLA or ALA recommend ‘*an opened attitude*’, especially in libraries – the only places left, where something can be got for free. In Poland borrowing books from libraries is still for free (*however, under the big*

corporations' pressure we have some EU recommendations in that matter and a new strategy for culture development mentions about that too [8]), but we have already fees for using databases. If we don't start to lobby for a free access to knowledge, libraries can lose their primary function they were created for.

There are many arguments for 'an opened attitude', but the major justification is the fight against an informational exclusion, discussed in Geneva, and also the fact that the costs of producing knowledge are born by the taxpayers. As nowadays globalization moves forward and the information is treated as the most important element of our civilization, so all restrictions in the access to information and knowledge create the sphere of excluded ones, who cannot afford to get it. The question is whether we need both: elites, which can afford to get the latest technology and knowledge easily, and, so-called - pariahs, for whom this sphere will remain in dreams only? I am leaving you with that question to think about.

Endnotes

- [1] Please, compare statistical data with *Diagnoza społeczna 2003: Warunki i jakość życia Polaków*, prepared for the government by Janusz Czapiński and Janusz Panek (Instytut Psychologii Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Rada Monitoringu Społecznego przy Wyższej Szkole Psychologii i Zarządzania w Warszawie). Chapter 7: Dominik Batorski, „*Ku społeczeństwu informacyjnemu*”. The authors also warn against omitting the actions significantly influencing the development of technology. [Access] http://www.diagnoza.com/20003/7_2003.html
- [2] GADOMSKI W., Między Wschodem za Zachodem, *Gazeta Wyborcza* from 15.12.2003, p. 26.
- [3] Visit official pages OAI [Access]: <http://www.openarchives.org/> Support for Open Archives Initiative activities has come from the Digital Library Federation, the Coalition for Networked Information, and from National Science Foundation.
- [4] Visit database Repositories [Access]: http://www.oaforum.org/oaf_db/list_db/list_repositories.php.
- [5] Berlin Declaration, Max Planck Institute's official web page of conferences: <http://www.zim.mpg.de/openaccess-berlin/berlindeclaration.html>.
- [6] The term comes from Wikipedia , [Access]: <http://pl.wikipedia.org/> , [access 10th January 2005].
- [7] Poynder Richard, Put Up or Shut Up, *Information Today*, Vol. 21 No. 8 — September 2004.
- [8] Narodowa Strategia Rozwoju Kultury na lata 2004-2013, [Access]: <http://www.mk.gov.pl/website/index.jsp?catId=245> [Access 10th January 2005].
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