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# The dominating places and methods of reading from antiquity to the present day: from reading as a public act to reading as a personal act

Georgios D. Bikos<sup>1</sup>

*Technological Educational Institute of Athens, Department of Library Science and Information Systems, St. Spyridon Str., Egaleo, 12210, Greece*

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## Abstract

This paper studies, from a sociological perspective, the historical and social aspects of reading as a (social and personal) practice in relation to the “place” where it is performed. This place is either in the public or private. After the terms reading practices, main reading methods, reading place and reading habits have been defined, the main reading methods are presented –i.e. intensive and extensive reading– and the main reading practices – i.e. out loud, whispering, silent. Then the reading methods and reading practices that were prevalent in each era are presented, along with the places where the act of reading usually took place. These places are as follows: primary public places or places of public reading (i.e. gathering places), public reading places or reading rooms and public libraries, semi-public places in monasteries, private domestic places and personal places. After associating the main reading practices and methods with the social and physical places where reading was performed, we ascertain that, from antiquity to the present day, we have gradually moved from public-centred to self-centred reading habits, particularly in the early 20th century and afterwards. And this, of course, is associated with the general shift of our society from socio-centred to self-centred models.

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## 1. Introduction

Every human action is defined by certain parameters. Two parameters define reading: the way it is done – that is what we call reading methods or practices – and the place where it is done – e.g. the coffee shop, public

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author. *E-mail address:* [g\\_bicos@hotmail.com](mailto:g_bicos@hotmail.com)

library, school, bedroom, office, train, beach, toilette etc. [1, 2]. Those though who comprehend human actions and activities in an historical and soci(ologic)al way should have in mind that beyond those two parameters there is also a *social frame* within reading is done. In other words, reading depends on the place or places and on the way or ways in which the majority of people read. In every society, the ways of reading and up to a point the places where people usually do their reading form based on the society's culture. This is why these ways and places change in time along with each society's structures, functions and of course culture (e.g. loud reading was a usual practice until the first decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century, while in our days silent reading is more common). Reading is therefore a human practice included in a historical and social frame.

We shall now see in details the reasons why bibliography characterizes reading as a social practice:

Firstly, in many centuries a mass population practices it, as now a huge majority of people on earth knows how to read.

Secondly, people learn reading within social institutions such as school, church and family.

Thirdly, human society itself has given a special value to reading as a mean of self-improvement and progress. It is so special in fact, that society has made us believe that in order to get sophisticated, mature, wise, critical thinking we spend years of reading books and texts of all kinds – even on a computer screen! That is why reading is among humanities great achievements! We have come to the safe conclusion that for many years society considers reading as a form of *investment*, in the broader *financial* sense of the meaning [2]. Moreover, this perspective comes a long way back from the time of Byzantium and Illumination.

The society, having given such a positive value to reading, has after all placed it as a (special) social value per se. Therefore, it is not all *only* about promoting the financial function of reading<sup>2</sup> procedure.

Of course, it is the positive evaluation of *writing*<sup>3</sup> that came before reading (since the latter could not have been without the first) and obviously the positive evaluation (especially by the Western world) of *speech* itself. (It is known that Illumination has promoted the value of thought and understanding, of reasoning, of logic and speech.)

Beyond that, today's society as its gradual formation since the 1960s bombards us constantly in every way, in all aspects of everyday life with images accompanied by lines and prints [3, 5, 6], symbols and meanings that must be read to pass the message.

Therefore, apart that society has set some values to direct to reading [7]<sup>4</sup>, it does not seem to forget to bring us in touch with *texts* and *make* us read constantly in order to *survive* in the public arena and in life in general.

## 2. Main part

Let us now point out the major *ways* of reading. With the term *vocal* reading we mean every reading that is not *silent*, it is not as we commonly say “within”. In bibliography, we meet the term also as *aloud* reading. The silent reading is also called *whispering* or *murmur* and it is a form of vocal reading [3].

Starting our historical reports we note that reading was aloud since ancient Greece [8, 9, 10, 2, 11, 4], as few people were reading silently at the time [9]. Ancient Sumerians – who invented the first writing system [12] – were reading aloud [2]. It is worth to mention that ancient languages do not separate *reading* and *speaking* as they use the same word for both [2].

<sup>2</sup> Thus, we can see reading as social self-worthiness and not just as “tool” value, which takes us to the theory of *social functionalism*.

<sup>3</sup> And one factor that made the west at least society give even more value and emphasis to the texts, was the special value that Science gave since Illumination and on, as the Science's relation with the written speech is not just organic but of existence too for the Science itself, as if there were not for writing, no Science could have developed and evolved, not even the scientific way of thinking [3, 4].

<sup>4</sup> See the value of the reading within school, see how necessary it is for anyone to obtain a certificate of studies, having first studied a corpus of texts, see the mentioned before investment value that reading has.

Aloud reading was dominating in Medieval era [7, 13], or at least in the early Medieval [14], and during the Byzantine era [9]. As the famous historic of reading Cavallo said “in Byzantium voice controls reading” [9]. Not to mention some scholars according to whom this way of reading was imposed by the way and the rules of writing as only when reading aloud could anyone identify every word in the text from the previous to the following one! [3, 15]

Summarizing and although there is great argument among specialists [3, 12], it is certain by many that reading was aloud or whispering during the Greek, Roman and first Medieval era, while the same period silent reading appears only as an exception and only by experienced readers [12]. Bollmann also notes that this reading first appeared among clericals and later passed on the university cycles and educated aristocracy to gradually extend later on through literacy to other groups of population [1]. As Svenbro, the famous scholar of reading in ancient Athens notes, according to what Knox implies, the factor that developed silent reading was the reader's occupation with a vast quantity of texts [16]. (But Psyhogios also mentions that reading long texts forces readers to read silently [12].) Therefore, it is logical that scholars like Herodotus, also the ones long before him, abandoned aloud reading during their historical research due to which they had to study numerous and really long texts [16]. They were definitely few the *readers* who had the skills of Herodotus and were *experienced*. Consequently, whatever we mentioned in the beginning of this paragraph stands true.

Aloud reading was dominating also during the 19<sup>th</sup> century [17], despite that in Germany silent reading was already been used since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century [12]. Besides, according to some historians silent reading was *easily accomplished* only in later Medieval [4]. (Silent reading's appearance is mentioned by Manguel as well [2]. Thus, silent reading appears more often since the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards [7]. According to Saenger, however, silent reading strengthens in the end of 13<sup>th</sup> century, as the completely different architecture of the Libraries prove. It is the first time, right in the end of 13<sup>th</sup> century that such reading places are formed and allow readers to sit next to each other [15]. In that case if someone was reading aloud the other one could not possibly sit next to them. It is possible of course that experienced readers were using mostly the libraries and not ordinary, laymen readers. Therefore, this kind of architecture does not necessarily prove that silent reading was spread among all population who could read.

Vocal reading practice though appears until the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century [18, 19]. While in school silent reading as a teaching “reading” method first appeared in the 1920's [20]. Noted though that aloud reading appears in rural people until today [7], as the so called semi-illiterate –which are the majority in the rural areas– read aloud even when they are alone as it seems they need to listen to the text in order to understand it [21]<sup>5</sup>.

Finally, the *murmuring* way of reading is between the aloud and silent and dominated in monasteries [9], assuming due to that in abbeys it was usual for monks to read in the same room, thus, it would be annoying if each could hear loud and clear what the others were reading.

Up to this point, we have referred to the reading ways, which base on the kind of voice used to read. There are also elements that form *other kinds of reading practices or ways* that depend on how we organize our reading as for the corpus of the text is concerned. These ways are about whether we read an entire text or only parts of it (:fragmentary reading [22]), or whether we read the different parts in the order of appearance or shuffled or we read the text from the end to the beginning [22]. We should not consider all this as paradox. Reading activity being *personal* always has to follow the will, the freedom and the discretion of the one to perform it; especially more if it is about an extensive text or an entire book and not just a chapter or two and even more if someone chooses to read it to enjoy themselves and not out of professional reason or other obligation. (However, the more imposed the way of reading by institutions such as School or the State the more often the reader's need to read a text in the most wrong, inappropriate, unorthodox, peculiar, free or original way. That is exactly because the reader, by acting so freely and personally as far as their reading way, balances somewhat psychologically the

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<sup>5</sup> For the cause of for long supersede of vocal reading against silent (internal) which we have not mention in this text see Bikos [3].

external pressure imposed to read.) We may realize how *positive* and *effective* the results can be in every such situation where someone has a rather or completely “inappropriate” way of reading –according to the ethics concerning the “appropriate” of the reading practice (an “appropriate way” that primary, secondary and higher education teaching élites have formed)- as it allows the liegeman to all external pressure whereas reading is concerned to feel satisfied because they manage to “impose on the text” and on the mandatory act of reading a *personal touch*. This way they try to become more receptive to the content of the reading text than they would be if they read in the “*appropriate*” way according to the secondary and higher level education standards.

Another kind of reading practices that is about the way of mentally processing the reading text that work as a pair, are these called *intensive* and *skim* reading. In the first one, the reader is interested in and tries hard to understand in depth whatever they are reading. The other, is more about reading a specific page or a number of pages instead of going into their deeper meanings. *Skimming* is usual when for example: a) the text gives mostly information (buses schedules, valences of chemical elements, words that are an exception from a grammar rule) and does not capture knowledge or does not develop arguments and thoughts, b) the reader has to read many pages in little time and c) their target is only to locate some specific information. Therefore, using *intensive* or *skim* reading mainly depends on the content and style of the text and on the time available, the reader has for reading, followed by the person’s mood and intensions.

One more way of reading, which bases on the way the reception of the material of the text read, is the one that corresponds to what we call *scan* reading. Within this kind of reading the reader gives a really *quick* but *careful* look on the text moving from the left upper part of the page to down right one usually in order to get the gist of it or the writer’s point of view on the topic of the writing. Of course, if there is something in the text that seems interesting then the reader might read the whole text in a *careful*, more *intensive* way.

Finally, there is one more way of reading that concerns the mental processing of the text. It is the one that corresponds in Scholasticism school of reading, which dominated in Medieval and mainly in 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century [2]. It is about a way of reading that they taught in schools at the time in Europe, according to which the meaning of each text was *one* and only; therefore every reader should try and understand this unique meaning. And the only way to deduce it was to focus on the meaning of each word of the text separately [2]. According to this school of reading the only way of conception of the one true meaning (the only authentic and genuine) of the text, especially in non-religious texts<sup>6</sup>, was to understand every word, every sentence of it. It is therefore a one-sided perception that focuses almost exclusively in the literal meaning of reading words into a dictionary and leaves aside all other aspects of the texts and any personal understanding and explanation that the reader could give. In our days, however this way of reading is not promoted. It is necessarily used in primary school –mainly in the first three grades– due to the limited ability of the little students to comprehend and mostly to interpret written speech because of their age.

If subsequently, we want to define the periods in which each of every one of the three mentioned reading ways dominated. We should note that all three are very much attached to every reading situation (meaning every occasion when a person gets to decide or is forced to read) and up to a point to the reading personality of every person something that does seem correct to try and compose a theory about the time of their appearance and domination. Choosing *intensive*, *skim* or *scan* reading is as much a personal issue for every reader as a matter of the time of reading. It is also a matter of where<sup>7</sup> the reader is and not a matter of socio-historical situations and structures that concern and define the reading practices used in every era. However, we can assume that *skim* and *scan* reading appeared gradually and became *common* only after the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While

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<sup>6</sup> But in the case of religious texts that were read at the time exclusively, even at schools, the “proper” reading was only one and of course defined by the Church.

<sup>7</sup> i.e. it is more possible for anyone to scan their newspaper when in the subway, than only scan it when sits for breakfast on a Sunday morning at their kitchen table. (And obviously we mean that they will not do so not because they can be because they will spend more time to this Sunday paper in a non scanning way.)

intensive reading was the only one dominating from ancient times until today and was the only of the three practices that was applied the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, we note that when reading is aloud there cannot be *scanning*, nor really fast reading (so both aloud and *skim* reading can only be relative and not absolute). When on the other hand we whisper, the reading speed can be really faster.

And one more observation: We all think, although this cannot be fully explained in a simple, clear and certain way, that writings with a deeper meaning are easier to comprehend when read silently by the reader.

Moving on to the next part of our text, we are dealing with the places of reading and their historical evolution and differentiation. Noted that, some of them impose adopting a specific *way* of reading; so here is how several places of reading link with the same ways of reading and the so called *reading practices*.

However, before all we should make some conceptual clarifications. To begin with, we detect the places of reading to the ones belonging to *public sphere* and the ones that belong to the *private*. Therefore, reading on the train, at the coffee shop, at work or a public library is done in a *public* place and reading at home, at a deserted part of woods or in a personal professional place (such as a law office) is done in a *private* one.

In addition, we are making the following distinction as far as the *public* character of reading is concerned; there is reading for a specific audience; that too is called *public reading*. Such for example is the reading of holly texts in church; the reading of a teacher or a student (instructed by the teacher) in class reading aloud a text for students to learn how to read; the reading of an announcement by the Minister of Education to the students of a school in the school yard or the classroom and the reading of a party's text in the work place of a factory through which workers are asked to participate in a strike. These kind of reading are obviously aloud. We note at this point the known social practice of public reading [20] of news and also of poems (sometimes legal texts too [23]), that dominated (at least in the West), not only in Medieval [3] but also until the 17<sup>th</sup> century [7, 24], due to the illiteracy which condemned a wide crowd of people to learn texts only by hearing them [19]. When *public reading* was at its peak there was also the institution of the *public lector* [2]. The phenomenon of public reading though existed in ancient Greece as well –it concerned only poems [4]. Public reading dominated even in Byzantium [9].<sup>8</sup>

There is, however, reading performed in a *public place*, but does not have an audience – this is why it is silent. For example, we read a book in a train, or a newspaper silently in a coffee shop. This reading we call it *publicly performed personal reading*. (We could have used the term private instead of personal, but private is every activity performed out of the sight of other people.)

Finally, there is private reading that is the one performed in a non public, in a private place such as home or the reader's professional place when this is not open to the public or there is no client inside.

The places where reading is performed distinct based on the following “figure”:

a) *public places*: places which do not really offer for reading practices (so reading is performed only occasionally). Such places are for example the coffee shops and the working places. Aloud readings organized by factory workers in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Cuba for their entertainment are very well known [2].

b) *public reading places*: places which exist clearly to offer the possibility of reading to everyone. These are the reading rooms/halls and public libraries.

c) *semi-public places*: these are the monasteries and all such places where reading can be performed. In the temples and monasteries mass and the reading of holly texts are a public reading as non-clergy can participate as well. We call monasteries and churches semi-public places because as we all know only clergy and monks are allowed to gather there.

d) *domestic meeting places or places of assemblages*: it is known that in the past centuries it was usual for friends, acquaintances and neighbors to meet in a home in order to entertain themselves listening someone

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<sup>8</sup> Cavallo talks about a “public and on stage reading” [9], mentioning that reading in Byzantium turned into a recitation or a play [9] – that is in a quasi theatrical play (and more precisely into a “show” of a *theatrical lector* [3]. For the theatricality of public reading in later Medieval see Manguel [2].

reading usually some literary work. According to Manguel such gatherings were a very usual social practice for people in the Medieval until printing was invented [2]<sup>9</sup>.

Domestic places of course are considered as *private*, but in cases as in e that follows, they are not thought as *entirely* private. Thus, we believe that there are some places still and completely *private-personal*.

e) *private-personal places*: such is the reader's home when they read there alone or when at least nobody else of the family is in at the time of reading. One place that was entirely private-personal and where the women were reading is the bedroom [1, 2]. It should be noted though that in previous centuries due to the large percentage of the illiterate it was very usual for anyone to read aloud exclusively for the members of their family who could not read [2]. Something that still exists when parents read a story to their children who have not learnt to read yet.

Table 1

### Basic categories of places performing reading

public sphere	«semi-public» -or quasi public-sphere (Abbeys)	private sphere
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Table 2

### Kinds of reading as for the basic categories of places performing reading

public aloud - reading	public personal reading - silent	personal or private reading	private reading
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Table 3

### Places to perform reading as for the developing kinds of reading in them

public places	public places + public places of reading	«semi-public» -or quasi public- places (Abbeys)	domestic places social and friendly meetings («semi-public» and aloud reading) + private personal places (personal-private reading)
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Having concluded a) the presentation of the main ways of reading and the periods of their appearance and b) the recording of the places where reading was and is performed we summarize with the above table. In table 1 we record the two broader places or basic categories-kinds of places in which reading is done. The middle column corresponds to Abbeys which public and “open” character has some limits that make us assume that it is more accurate the term *quasi public* or “*semi-public*”.

In table 2 we have the kinds of reading which appear in each of the mentioned “places”-spheres. The common color used to highlight shows that the kinds in green appear in places in green, the ones in yellow appear in the places in yellow and so on so forth.

<sup>9</sup> See more on *at home public reading* of the time, in Manguel [2].



In table 3 the five places of reading mentioned before are recorded. And obviously the columns where they are written correspond vertically with the columns in table 2 in the sense that “public reading” recorded in the first column in table 2 corresponds with the “public places” on the first column in table 3 etc. In addition, on the last column we use the term *semi-public* as gatherings in homes includes people who are not family (friends, neighbors).

Consequently, the above illustration captures the relation between *places* and *ways* of reading, showing once more, that places form to a great extent the ways of reading.

At the end of this analysis we note that man acquired consciousness of their individuality and started slowly to define their identity, (daily) life and special personality only when they came out of their social structures, social external definitions and their perceptions since the medieval era. The same way reading was understood and realized in the West as a *personal*, and then *private* action, after Medieval and probably in the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. We refer to a transition from the comprehension of the *social member* to the one of the *individual* and from the *individual* to the *person*. Transitions made slowly and needed many years to fulfil. However, some groups of readers such as monks and literate realized sooner than others reading as a deep and personal and private activity. Furthermore the domination of the *silent* reading helped them make this assumption; first because this way of reading corresponds to an absolute internal reception of communication, cohesion and understanding of the content of the text. Second, because silent reading is an absolute *private* and *personal* action as none but the reader receives the messages of what read. (Pietism a movement developed during Lutheranism helped further in spreading silent reading. Pietism occurred in the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and demanded that the believer to have a more direct, personal, inner relationship with their God and His Word – therefore with the holly texts they were reading [1].)

So, reading from being *external centred* –that is focusing on others beyond the reader (audience listening to the reading) and *public centred*– that is performed in public places in front of other people beyond the reader - action and activity when illiteracy dominated, transformed into person centred– that is in personal and private. (And the difference between them is that private reading only serves the reader. Moreover, it happens in a place where the reader is alone.) Therefore, in this way it stopped being only about the socialization through books and reading. It started helping the person establish their personal identity and through their free selection of books their personality. (While on the other hand the socializing part of reading includes the reader into a society, a community of other people with whom they share the same thoughts, perceptions, and culture that the books they all read offer – as like they were members of a *reading club*. And of course such was the part of the religious books and their reading when they dominated among other kinds of books<sup>10</sup>.)

Respectively, major reading practices have changed. This is why reading is not met in gatherings in homes anymore, despite that reading in public sphere as a *public personal reading* is particularly usual.

In general today's society is a *mass* society and not a *community* or a *collective* society. That means that the relations among its members are less than before. We meet such structures in public libraries too, where everyone are in the same place although they are working on a different mental project studying different books, but they do the same thing: they read.

Today there is one more institution that operates in the same way as public libraries<sup>11</sup> and has to do with the internet cafés where people go to surf the internet, play computer games or read electronic texts that interest them. They also look like public libraries as the PCs order is similar to the one of the seats in the reading halls of the libraries.

<sup>10</sup> See on this era Bikos [3].

<sup>11</sup> We prefer the term *non private* from the term *public* libraries because in Library Science the term *public* cites to a status of the libraries concerning where they belong (so the term is used only for libraries belonging to the State or Municipalities), and not to the number and the kind of people using their material and premises while with the term *public* we have in mind a wider crowd of people using them – so we include in these even academic ones or the so called *special* libraries.

These places give the user a sense of privacy as it is hard to even cross your sight with any other person in there. That is how not only libraries but also new forms of reading such as the internet cafés consort with the reading model of the last centuries as for the internal spaces are concerned.

In our years the trend of personal and private element “invading” public places is very usual and allows everyone to preserve their individuality.

### 3. Conclusion

Reading therefore, has not lost its social and public face. It has lost its public operation (public aloud *reading*) but never stopped being performed personally in public places (internet cafés, public libraries, Means of Transportation).

Reading just like writing is by definition a *personal* action as it is a mental operation of the human brain and can be performed in public. Besides, how could possibly be difficult to perform reading in public when the society itself through its culture pushes us –as we mentioned earlier in our text- so much to read?

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