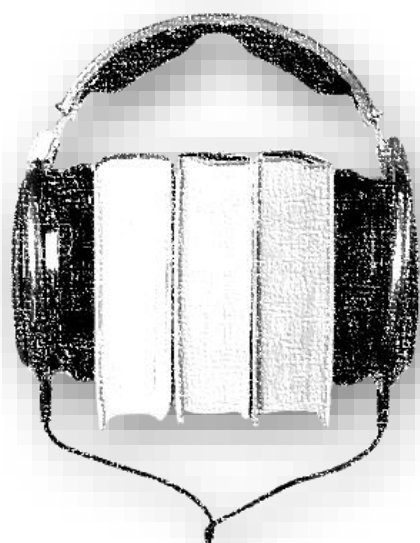


Listening or reading: the audiobook in relation to the paper book



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Introduction

The traditional form of the book has seen several digital transformations in the last few decades. First the publishing industry was shaken up by the arrival of the e-book, and now the audiobook is the newest revolution in the book world. Audiobooks, sometimes also called ‘spoken books’, ‘talking books’ or ‘narrated books’, have gained a lot of popularity in recent years, and are still attracting new users. But where the e-book is also text-based, the audiobook is a very different way of experiencing a book.

Audiobooks go back to the oral tradition of reading aloud. Before the majority of the population was literate, having a book read aloud by someone else was for many the only way to access the book’s content. Now, in our reading culture, the story read by someone else has made a return. Schools increasingly make use of audiobooks or audio fragments, and leisure readers, especially young ones, opt more and more often for the audio version instead of the paper book. At the same time, critics say that listening to audiobooks is ‘lazy’ and ‘not as good as reading’.

Nonetheless, the rise of audiobooks continues. Audiobook sales have seen an immense growth over the last decade, with no end in sight yet. While audiobooks are still a small part of the book market, it is the area that is growing the fastest. In 2013, 24,305 audiobook titles were published in the US and by 2019 this figure had increased to 60,303 titles.¹ Between 2013 and 2019 sales consistently rose each year.² Survey results show that each year more Americans say they have listened to an audiobook and that the average number of books they listened to per year also increases.³ In the Netherlands 20% of survey respondents said they are audiobook users in 2020; this was an increase compared to previous years.⁴ The same percentage of Americans is reported to

¹ Audio Publishers Association, ‘Audiobook Industry Sales Survey Key Points 2013-2017’
<<https://www.audiopub.org/uploads/pdf/APA-Research-2013-2017.pdf>> (20-12-2020);

Audio Publishers Association, ‘Audiobook Industry Sales Survey Key Points 2015-2019’, 2020
<<https://www.audiopub.org/uploads/pdf/APA-Research-2015-2019.pdf>> (20-12-2020).

² Audio Publishers Association, ‘Audiobook Industry Sales Survey Key Points 2013-2017’;
Audio Publishers Association, ‘Audiobook Industry Sales Survey Key Points 2015-2019’.

³ Audio Publishers Association, ‘Consumer Survey and 2019 Sales Survey Press Release’, 2020
<<https://www.audiopub.org/uploads/pdf/2020-Consumer-Survey-and-2019-Sales-Survey-Press-Release-FINAL.pdf>> (20-12-2020);

Audio Publishers Association, ‘Consumer Survey Press Release’, 2019
<<https://www.audiopub.org/uploads/pdf/Consumer-Survey-Press-Release-2019-FINAL.pdf>> (20-10-2020).

⁴ N. Nagelhout and C. Richards, ‘Rapportage Boekenbranche Meting 53’, *GfK*, 2020, p.7
<https://www.kvbboekwerk.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Rapportage-Boekenbranche-M53_def.pdf> (3-12-2020).

listen to audiobooks.⁵ Also in the UK sales and consumption has grown dramatically over the years.⁶ It is clear that audiobooks are booming, and worth investigating.

A brief history of the audiobook

Before people could read and write, the only way to tell stories was through the spoken word. When reading and writing was invented, this didn't change much at first, as only a small group of people was literate. What is more, up until the nineteenth century, silent reading was not common, but books were usually read aloud. After more people became literate, reading aloud and oratory remained important, especially in churches and universities, where people 'believed reading aloud to be essential to the appreciation of literature'.⁷ Some texts were written specifically to be read or sung out loud. There were also still many people that couldn't read and they were dependent on so-called 'mediated literacy': literate people that used their literacy for the benefit of the illiterate.⁸ During the Industrial Revolution, more and more people became literate and silent reading became a more common practice.

By the twentieth century silent reading practices as we know them today were firmly established. But the audiobook already existed. The birth of the audiobook lies in the invention of the phonograph in 1877 by Thomas Edison, who invented it for the purpose of recording books. But Edison's phonograph didn't catch on, or at least wasn't used to record books. The first real audiobooks were made in 1934 by The American Foundation for the Blind, who recorded full-length novels on vinyl records. Initial recordings included plays by William Shakespeare and the Bible.⁹ Audiobooks were regarded as the perfect solution to make books available for the visually impaired, but it came with the stigma that they were only for people who couldn't read, because if you could, you should. Why listen to a book if you could read it? Listening was seen as inferior to reading.

It was not until the 1960s, with the invention of cassette tapes, that commercial audiobooks started to gain popularity. Audio publishers mainly targeted commuters, who could listen in their car, or while they were walking if they had a Walkman. In the 1980s, cassette tapes were replaced by

⁵ A. Perrin, 'One-in-five Americans now listen to audiobooks,' 2019, n.pag. <<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/08/nearly-one-in-five-americans-now-listen-to-audiobooks/>> (20-12-2020).

⁶ S. Woodley and O. Mantell, 'Reading for Pleasure An Evidence Review', 2020, p.21 <<https://www.theaudienceagency.org/asset/2197>> (3-12-2020).

⁷ M. Rubery, *The Untold Story of the Talking Book*, (Cumberland: Harvard University Press, 2016), p.6.

⁸ A. Briggs and P. Burke, *A Social History of the Media: From Gutenberg to the Internet*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2005), p.27.

⁹ Rubery, *The Untold Story of the Talking Book*, p.6.

CDs. By the time the 1990s came around, audiobooks were commercially established – they were no longer just for the blind. In 1995 Audible made it possible to download books onto the computer,¹⁰ and in the new millennium the audiobook business really took off due to the combination of the widespread use of smartphones and the arrival of streaming services such as Audible and Storytel. Whereas previously audiobooks were only available in the form of cassettes or CDs, they were now more easily and quickly accessible at any place and time. In the US in 2013, 27.8% of audiobooks were sold in CD format and 69.6% was digital, whereas in 2019 just 1.9% were sold in CD format compared to 94.5% in digital format.¹¹ The internet, downloadable files, and new digital devices, made listening to an audiobook easier than ever.

Listening while commuting remained popular. Listening to audiobooks, like listening to podcasts, is now regarded as the perfect way to spend time otherwise ‘wasted’. In a fast-paced world, where time seems scarce, it might be the only way to consume books for some people. As Matthew Rubery says in his book *The Untold Story of the Talking Book*: ‘Once derided as the lazy man’s way to read, recorded books would gradually become associated in the popular imagination with hardworking professionals who had little time to read the old-fashioned way.’¹²

It seems that the audiobook’s overall reputation has had a boost in the last decades. While it certainly still has its critics, it does seem like the old stigma has worn off. For example, the Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant* now has an audiobook reviewer who exclusively discusses audiobooks, under the title ‘*De boekenluisteraar*’ (The book listener), illustrating that the audiobook seems to have gained a certain level of prestige. This rise in prestige of the audiobook seems to go hand in hand with the declining prestige of the paper book, and reading in general. Not so long ago, the book in its codex form was considered sacred and early audiobooks attempted to adhere as closely as possible to their paper equivalents. But now the audiobook has become an independent art form, rather than just a replicate of the paper book.

It is in this friendlier environment that the audiobook is flourishing. But there are still concerns, for example that audiobooks are contributing to the decline of reading. But what are the consequences if people are reading less and listening more? The rise of audiobooks and the possible implications this has is exactly why it is important that the audiobook is closely examined.

¹⁰ Rubery, *The Untold Story of the Talking Book*, p. 248.

¹¹ Audio Publishers Association, ‘Audiobook Industry Sales Survey Key Points 2013-2017’; Audio Publishers Association, ‘Audiobook Industry Sales Survey Key Points 2015-2019’.

¹² Rubery, *The Untold Story of the Talking Book*, p. 24.

Research objectives of the thesis

This thesis sets out to explore the nature of the audiobook, and its strengths and flaws in the context of current values we attach to reading, to find out what the place of the audiobook is and can become in the world of storytelling. Where does the audiobook stand in book culture, and how does this relate to the traditional paper book?

The main research question is: based on current developments, to what extent can we expect the audiobook to replace the paper book? And what will be the consequences of reading less and listening more? To investigate this, I have set up the following sub-research questions:

- What are the (unintended) effects of book reading?
- Do the effects of book reading also occur with book listening?
- What are the reasons individuals read (what are their intended goals) and do these reasons correspond with the reasons for listening to audiobooks?
- Why do people specifically choose an audiobook format, and where and when do they listen to audiobooks?
- What kind of people listen to audiobooks?
- Is audiobook listening taking away time from book reading?

The hypothesis is that people mainly listen to an audiobook for the same reasons as they read a paper book, but that they opt for an audiobook because of convenience. I expect that many people listen to audiobooks while doing other things and this is why they like audiobooks. On an individual level, I therefore think that audiobooks fulfil the intended goals. However, I expect that the effects of reading might not stretch to audiobooks, and that the perceived benefits of reading cannot be fulfilled by listening to audiobooks, though individuals may not be aware of this. Ultimately, I expect that audiobooks will replace the traditional book more and more, and that the implications are that the positive effects of reading are less with listening.

Scope of the thesis

In this thesis audiobooks are compared with paper books: paperbacks and hard-covers. Both non-fiction and fiction books are discussed.

The term 'book' is not a straightforward one. Book historians haven't reached a consensus on what a book is, because there have been so many forms of books throughout history. Before the codex there were clay tablets and scrolls – now there are e-books and audiobooks. Kovaç and colleagues attempted to get a clearer understanding of what can be categorized as a book in their paper 'What is a book', in which they included a schema that shows that most definitions of the book

do not encompass audiobooks, while a print novel (they give *The Great Gatsby* as example) is a book by all definitions in the schema.¹³ Though the word ‘book’ can be defined in different ways, in this thesis it means the ‘printed codex’. While it can be interpreted in a broader way, this is the traditional book as we have come to know it, and what most people would picture when they think of a book.

In relation to the book, ‘audiobook’ will mean the audio version of a book: the printed text read aloud. This needs to be specified because the exact definition of ‘audiobook’ is also not clear-cut. Originally audiobooks were meant to be plain recordings of books, and narrators were encouraged to speak in a neutral way.¹⁴ There are still some audiobooks today, especially those made for blind or visually impaired people, where the narrator has a neutral voice and intonation, and even the pictures, if present, are described.¹⁵ In this way it is the most true to the print version and the most similar to reading the book. But nowadays more and more audiobooks are produced with special effects, music or multiple people doing voices for different characters (full-cast audiobooks or dramatized audiobooks), more resembling the radio dramas that were popular in the beginning of the twentieth century. Recently, audio publishers have been increasingly experimenting with ‘original audiobooks’, which have no print source but are born digital. Can these original audiobooks still be called audiobooks then, if they are not based on a book? Moreover, some audiobooks are adaptations, which do not follow the book they were based on word-for-word but deviate from it, and some audiobooks are recorded as a podcast in several episodes. Clearly the term ‘audiobook’ is not strictly defined. The more enhancements an audiobook has, the further it strides away from the traditional book. And as Rubery puts it, ‘the high degree of media convergence characteristic of today’s marketplace makes it difficult to separate books, audiobooks, and other media as neatly as we once did.’¹⁶ The lines are blurry. This is even further illustrated by publishers who promote their products as ‘audio entertainment’, which have little to do with books anymore.¹⁷ In this thesis, unless stated otherwise, the term ‘audiobook’ is used to refer to a word-for-word recording of a paper book, which has one narrator and is not dramatized. The reason for this is because the focus lies on the relationship between the paper version of a book and its audio equivalent. Podcasts or other auditory entertainment are therefore excluded from the discussion, though they would also be interesting to take into account as there seems to be a strong correlation

¹³ M. Kovaç, M. A. Phillips, A. H. van der Weel, R. Wischenbart, ‘What is a book?’, *Publishing Research Quarterly*, 35.2 (2019), pp. 313–326.

¹⁴ Rubery, *The Untold Story of the Talking Book*, p. 245.

¹⁵ Dedicon, ‘Luisterboeken versus gesproken boeken’ <<https://www.dedicon.nl/productie/audio/luisterboeken-versus-gesproken-boeken>> (31-8-2020).

¹⁶ Rubery, *The Untold Story of the Talking Book*, p. 246.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 269.

between podcast listeners, radio listeners and audiobook listeners.¹⁸ In recent years there has been an explosion of podcasts, and the popularity of audiobooks is often linked with that, but whereas podcasts typically have a duration varying from a few minutes to a few hours, audiobooks are many hours long (the average is ten hours),¹⁹ and listening to them is more of a commitment, just like reading a book. Lastly, I focus on digital audiobooks because nowadays they are far more common than analogue audiobooks (more than 90% of audiobooks are now digital).²⁰

Another complex term is 'reading'. When people talk about reading, they usually refer to reading letters or characters. However, reading can be interpreted in a much broader way, and could even include listening to audiobooks. In *The Untold Story of the Talking Book* Matthew Rubery cites several people who have tried to broaden the term rather than narrowing it. For example N. Katherine Hayles, who sees the decline of what would traditionally be called reading as an incentive to redefine what reading is. 'She highlights the damage caused by a narrow definition that treats any deviations from print as impostors. Instead, her approach would have us build bridges between traditional literacies associated with print and the kinds of reading used to navigate electronic media.'²¹ Trying to make the definition broader also stems from the urge to include visually impaired people into the reading group. Some say however, that while it is important to accommodate blind people, only reading braille should be considered reading, not listening to a book. Others still find this limiting. D. W. Tuttle, for example, says a better definition of reading would be 'the recognition, interpretation, and assimilation of the ideas represented by symbolic material, whether it is displayed visually, tactilely, or aurally.'²² This means that listening could also be considered reading. While it makes sense to include symbolic material displayed visually or tactilely (braille), including auditory material does not. To be able to listen you don't need to recognize symbolic material, otherwise everybody could be considered literate. The distinction between literate and illiterate people is the distinction between people who can and can't decode certain symbols, i.e. writing. For listening, that step isn't necessary. According to Rubery, one of the advocates for not counting listening as reading, Philip Hatlen, 'seemed uncomfortable with the fact that a lifelong reader could be rendered "illiterate" by sight loss late in life',²³ but you could also say that only people who have never learned to read (including braille) and write are illiterate. People who have learned to read but

¹⁸ Woodley and Mantell, 'Reading for Pleasure An Evidence Review', p. 22; Audio Publishers Association, 'Consumer Survey Press Release'.

¹⁹ Kobo, 'Audiobook file sizes' <<https://help.kobo.com/hc/en-us/articles/360018108913-Audiobook-file-sizes>> (29-3-2021)

²⁰ Audio Publishers Association, 'Audiobook Industry Sales Survey Key Points 2013-2017'; Audio Publishers Association, 'Audiobook Industry Sales Survey Key Points 2015-2019'.

²¹ Rubery, *The Untold Story of the Talking Book*, p. 17.

²² Ibid, p. 18.

²³ Ibid.

are unable to read due to a disability later in life, are still literate, because even if they are not able to read physically, they still could cognitively. For example, they could imagine the writing in their head.

A distinction between two kinds of reading can be made:

- Decoding a standardized set of symbols – so reading text, but also reading braille or reading music can fall under this. It is a skill that someone needs to learn formally, and not a natural ability.
- Interpreting something – deducing something from the available data or, even more general, getting information and understanding it. This is much broader, like reading the room or reading a face. This doesn't need to be taught formally.

Listening can be situated between these two categories. There is no need to decode a set of symbols, but it does require understanding language, which is a symbolic system in that words have a circumscribed meaning. However, it is not learned formally, but naturally, like the second category. Besides this, there are of course more crucial differences between listening and reading, for example that listening doesn't require visual processing and reading does. For the sake of clarity in this thesis, 'reading' refers to reading print (decoding symbols). People 'listen' to audiobooks.

E-books are left out of the discussion because they are an entirely separate format which has its own characteristics. E-books could be regarded as a format in-between paper books and audiobooks: they are digital products, like most audiobooks, but still mimic the book's *mise en page*, and they still need to be read. This means that they have some characteristics in common with paper books (e.g., they need to be seen and read) and some with audiobooks (e.g., they are file-based). E-books are mentioned sometimes in this thesis, but are not elaborated on.

This discussion also excludes so-called *interactive books*, which integrate touch, smell and/or audio, as they are mainly for children and are not a big part of the book market.

Lastly, the focus of this thesis is on leisure reading and listening, and not on reading for educational purposes. While audiobook use in education is also interesting to look at, this will lie outside of the scope of this thesis. First of all, because often only snippets of audiobooks or podcasts are used in educational settings, and this thesis only looks at full-length audiobooks. Furthermore, only reading in adulthood will be addressed, because the audiobook market is mainly targeted towards adults (in 2019 90.9% of all audiobooks in the US were made for adults),²⁴ and because adults already know how to read, so learning to read is not a motivation for reading, as it may be for children. This thesis specifically focuses on adults that *want* to read instead of having to read for their study or work, so they have intrinsic reading motivation as opposed to extrinsic reading motivation.

²⁴ Audio Publishers Association, 'Audiobook Industry Sales Survey Key Points 2015-2019'.

Sources used

In this thesis I've made use of secondary sources. The studies cited are mainly from the last 20 years. Studies where the focus was on children's or ESL students' reading development or learning were not taken into account because that was outside the scope of this thesis. Podcast material also lies outside the scope, but there was one study that used podcasts where more broad conclusions about audio in general could be drawn from, so this study was included.

Throughout the thesis, surveys administered in the US, the UK, and the Netherlands are used. With the help of these surveys audiobook users' preferences and behaviours are mapped out. The sources consulted from the Netherlands are a survey conducted by WPG, Luisterrijk and Hebban in 2017 (published on the Hebban website)²⁵ and several reports about book consumers commissioned by KVB-SMB, CPNB, KB and Stichting Lezen, and carried out by GfK (an organisation concerned with consumer research).

In the US, the Audio Publishers Association (APA), a non-profit organisation that represents the audio publishing industry in the US, publishes a press release each year about the annual consumer survey conducted by Edison Research. These press releases, and especially the three most recent ones from 2018, 2019 and 2020, are consulted in this thesis.

From the UK, I've consulted a study in 2019 that was carried out by Kantar and commissioned by the Publisher's Association (PA), the member organisation for UK publishing. Other UK statistics come from a study done by Nielsen Book Research in 2017, which is cited in a report about audiobooks commissioned by Arts Council England, 'Reading for pleasure'.

These survey results do not give a fully accurate representation of audiobook consumers, but they do give an indication of who they are, how they behave and what motivates them. Only the summaries of surveys conducted by the APA are freely available online and I didn't have access to the full research, which makes it not entirely possible to compare the annual surveys. The study carried out by Nielsen Book Research is also not freely available.

Outline of the thesis

Research has shown that long-form reading has certain unintended effects that are considered beneficial for both the individual as for society as a whole. Chapter 1 looks at these effects in more detail; they are divided into cognitive effects and social-emotional effects. Chapter 2 then looks at the known or expected cognitive effects and social-emotional effects of listening, based on the

²⁵ Hebban Crew. 'Infographic: het luisterboek in 2017', *Hebban*, 2017, n.pag.
<<https://www.hebban.nl/artikelen/infographic-het-luisterboek-in-2017>> (3-12-2020).

differences between listening and reading. Research on the effects of listening is cited if available, and when there isn't research available, it is argued whether or not it is likely that listening to audiobooks has the same effects as reading if you take the characteristics of audio into account. The aim is to find out as best as possible to what extent the effects are the same or different.

Besides reading having unintended effects, reading also has intended effects, in other words, readers have reading goals. In Chapter 3 we examine why people read: what are their goals for reading a book? Studies and survey research are used to make categories of reading goals. It is discussed if the goals are generally associated more with fiction reading or non-fiction reading. In Chapter 4 we look at audiobook motivation. In the first part, 4.1, survey research about listening motivation and data about where and when people listen to audiobooks is discussed to identify reasons for choosing to listen to an audiobook and connect those to the characteristics of the audiobook. In the second part, 4.2, we look at whether people have the same goals when they listen to an audiobook as when they read a book. If available, research on the different listening goals is cited, and where there is no research available, it is attempted to establish whether or not it is likely that listeners of audiobooks have the same goals as readers if you take the characteristics of audio into account.

In Chapter 5 we zoom in on the audiobook user. Who listens to audiobooks? Survey research is used to identify which demographic group are the heaviest users. Also data about reading and listening in the first partial lockdown in the Netherlands is discussed to see how people's reading and listening habits changed in this period. It is examined whether audiobook listeners are readers as well and if audiobook listening is taking away time from book reading.

In Chapter 6 the research question is answered. It makes predictions about the future of audiobooks and book reading and discusses the implications of a decrease in long-form book reading.

1. Effects of reading

It has been established through research that reading is important and that it is good for you. In this chapter the effects of long-form reading that have been found in research are described. These effects are not aimed for by the reader (they are unintended) but are considered positive and beneficial for the individual as well as for society as a whole. A distinction is made between the cognitive effects and the social-emotional effects.

1.1 Cognitive effects of reading

‘From a neuroscientist’s perspective, reading entails decoding graphic symbols into language using a specific region of the brain associated with vision.’²⁶ However reading²⁷ is not all visual, as ‘decoding letters makes use of multiple visual and auditory networks’.²⁸ When reading a book, a person uses most of their senses: sight and, to a lesser extent, hearing (to listen to their inner voice),²⁹ in addition to touch when they are holding the book and turning the pages, and maybe even smell, as books can have a distinctive smell. It is cognitively stimulating because it uses so many different parts of the brain.

Reading is one form of mental stimulation that seems to improve memory³⁰ and reduce the risk of dementia.³¹ It is also associated with longevity. In one study book reading was found to contribute to a survival advantage: book readers tended to live longer.³² Literary reading is also found to help increase mental flexibility.³³ One study found that reading heightened connectivity in the brain, during and after reading. The heightened connectivity appeared in regions of the brain that are associated with perspective taking and story comprehension.³⁴

How can it be that reading has these positive effects on cognition? This can be explained by

²⁶ Rubery, *The Untold History Of The Talking Book*, p. 14.

²⁷ Reading braille is excluded here.

²⁸ Rubery, *The Untold History Of The Talking Book*, p. 14.

²⁹ Ibid, pp. 14-15.

³⁰ R. S. Wilson et al., ‘Life-span cognitive activity, neuropathologic burden, and cognitive aging’, *Neurology*, 81.4 (2013), pp. 314-21.

³¹ R. P. Friedland et al., ‘Patients with Alzheimer’s disease have reduced activities in midlife compared with healthy control-group members’, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 98.6 (2001), pp. 3440-3445; M. Wirth et al., ‘Gene–environment interactions: lifetime cognitive activity, APOE genotype, and beta-amyloid burden’, *Journal of Neuroscience*, 34.25 (2014), pp. 8612-8617.

³² A. Bavishi, M. D. Slade, and B. R. Levy, ‘A chapter a day: Association of book reading with longevity’, *Social Science & Medicine*, 164 (2016), pp. 44-48.

³³ N. O’Sullivan et al., ‘“Shall I compare thee”: The neural basis of literary awareness, and its benefits to cognition’, *Cortex*, 73 (2015), pp. 144-157.

³⁴ G. S. Bernset et al., ‘Short-and long-term effects of a novel on connectivity in the brain’, *Brain connectivity*, 3.6 (2013), pp. 590-600.

illustrating a number of characteristics of text.

First of all, text is read, and reading requires visual processing.³⁵ That text is visual means that visual cues can be used for guidance during the reading process. For example, the traditional book has a layout, or *mise-en-page*, and makes use of signalling devices such as typographical elements and punctuation marks that give the reader certain clues. Some are for structure; for example, a heading signals that a new chapter begins, or a blank line can signal a jump in time. Others give clues as to how the text should be interpreted: exclamation marks can signal enthusiasm, italics can signal emphasis, etc. A book can also contain pictures or illustrations, which also give structure to the text. It is possible to have a 'visual memory' of where you are in a book and that enables the reader to quickly go back to a page or passage. This visual memory allows the reader to navigate more easily through the book. The fact that text is structured also structures the mind, which stimulates analytical thinking.

Furthermore, reading involves decoding symbols which in itself strengthens cognition. In Gough and Tunmer's 'Simple View', reading consists of two processes: decoding and language processing (by contrast listening only involves language processing).³⁶ The decoding process is effortful to some extent, (the better a person's reading skills are, the less effort it takes; for example for someone with dyslexia reading takes a lot of effort), and therefore requires patience, focus and concentration. A person cannot actively read and do something else at the same time, and when the decoding process stops, reading stops, so the decoding process makes reading a concentrated activity with one focus point. Reading therefore gives the reader the opportunity to slow down and reflect. Furthermore, because reading a book is long-form, it can strengthen the ability to concentrate, because the reader has to focus on one thing for a longer period of time, and needs to exercise patience. (Audiobooks are also long-form, but as we'll see in the next chapter, they have other qualities that are not beneficial to concentration.)

Lastly, text is non-linear, so it allows the reader to read in his own pace and stop to reflect and think about what's been read. It also allows the reader to easily go back in the text and reread something. Daniel Willingham said in an interview that 'about 10 to 15% of eye movements during reading are actually regressive—meaning [the eyes are] going back and re-checking'³⁷ which 'almost certainly' is beneficial to comprehension.³⁸

³⁵ Again, not including reading braille in this.

³⁶ P. B. Gough and W. E. Tunmer, 'Decoding, Reading, and Reading Disability', *Remedial and Special Education*, 7.1 (2016), pp. 6-10.

³⁷ D. Willingham, 'Is Listening to an Audio book "cheating?"' *Daniel Willingham-Science and Education*, (2016), n.pag. <<http://www.danielwillingham.com/daniel-willingham-science-and-education-blog/is-listening-to-an-audio-book-cheating>> (22-1-2021).

³⁸ Ibid.

These aspects of text allow a person to think deeply, reflect and think critically. This kind of reading is called 'deep reading', which is 'the array of sophisticated processes that propel comprehension and that include inferential and deductive reasoning, analogical skills, critical analysis, reflection, and insight'.³⁹ Long-form reading (e.g. reading books) stimulates deep reading, and deep reading stimulates the cognitive effects described above, such as comprehension and memory.

Another reason why reading books can contribute to deep reading has to do with a book being a physical object, rather than it being text-based. Interacting with the book in a physical way contributes to the reading experience. Being able to turn pages, in combination with having a visual memory, is helpful when the reader wants to go back in the story or look up information. Another haptic aspect of reading a book is annotating (underlining sentences or making notes) and what Shibata et al. defined as 'text touching', such as 'pointing to words and sliding their fingers or pens along sentences'.⁴⁰ They found that text touching improved 'active reading' skills, so this might be especially important for non-fiction. In any case, the paper book's physicality helps to facilitate deep reading.

1.2 Social-emotional effects of reading

Empathy

Readers are exposed to different kinds of people, who they would not encounter in real life, for example people from other cultures, different religions or socio-economic environments than their own. Reading a book allows the reader to see inside someone else's head, and see things from a different perspective. Readers also get exposed to new ideas, which can stimulate them to think about issues they normally wouldn't think about.

Because through reading you encounter more viewpoints and different characters, many studies have found that reading fiction improves empathy,⁴¹ and literary fiction in particular

³⁹ M. Wolf and M. Barzillai, 'The importance of deep reading', *Educational Leadership*, 66.6 (2009), p. 33.

⁴⁰ H. Shibata, K. Takano, and S. I. Tano, 'Text touching effects in active reading: The impact of the use of a touch-based tablet device', *IFIP Conference on Human-Computer Interaction*. (Springer, Cham, 2015), pp. 559-576.

⁴¹ E.g. E. M. Koopman, 'Empathic reactions after reading: The role of genre, personal factors, and affective responses.' *Poetics*, 50, (2015), pp. 62-79; R.A. Mar, K. Oatley, J.B. Peterson, 'Exploring the link between reading fiction and empathy: Ruling out individual differences and examining outcomes', *Communications-The European Journal of Communication Research*, 34, (2009), pp. 407-428.

improves theory of mind (the capacity to comprehend that other people's views, desires and emotions might differ from your own).⁴²

Wellbeing

Reading is relaxing, and can improve general wellbeing. Studies have found that reading can reduce stress,⁴³ and it is also linked with lower levels of loneliness in elderly people.⁴⁴ Billington found an association with overall wellbeing, stating that 'those who read for pleasure report lower levels of stress and depression, higher levels of life satisfaction, self-esteem, and the ability to cope with difficult situations, as well as increased feelings of social connection.'⁴⁵ O'Sullivan et al. also found that reading improved overall wellbeing.⁴⁶

⁴² E.g. D. C. Kidd, E. Castano, 'Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind.' *Science*, 342.6156 (2013), pp. 377-380.

⁴³ D. Rizzolo et al. 'Stress Management Strategies For Students: The Immediate Effects Of Yoga, Humor, And Reading On Stress.' *Journal of College Teaching and Learning*, 6.8 (2009), pp. 79-88;

P. Jin 'Efficacy of Tai Chi, brisk walking, meditation, and reading in reducing mental and emotional stress.' *Psychosom Res.* 36.4 (1992), pp. 361-70.

⁴⁴ D. Rane-Szostak en K. A. Herth, 'Pleasure Reading, Other Activities, and Loneliness in Later Life', *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 39.2 (1995), pp. 100-108.

⁴⁵ J. Billington, 'Reading between the lines: The benefits of reading for pleasure', *University of Liverpool* (2015).

⁴⁶ O'Sullivan et al. "“Shall I compare thee”".

2. Effects of listening

In this chapter we look at the cognitive and social-emotional effects of listening. More research has been done on the effects of reading a book than on listening to a book and there are not many comparative studies. This means there is not a lot of information about the effects that listening has, and whether or not (or to what extent) the effects of reading apply to listening to audiobooks. However, with the characteristics of text in mind, and looking at how those differ from the characteristics of audio, some assumptions can be made based about this. And of course if there is research available, it will be referenced.

2.1 Do the cognitive effects of reading also occur with listening?

'Reading with the eyes uses a different part of the brain (the visual cortex) than does reading with the ears (the auditory cortex)',⁴⁷ says Matthew Rubery, author of multiple books about audiobooks. 'Reading is neurologically and cognitively different from what takes place when a person hears a book.'⁴⁸ When listening to a book a person uses fewer senses than while reading a book (mostly just their hearing sense), so it is less cognitively stimulating.

When you take the characteristics of text mentioned in Chapter 1 and compare them to audio, it is likely that the cognitive effects are less strong when listening to audiobooks compared to reading books.

First of all, as audio is not read, but listened to, no visual processing is required. As audio is not visual, there are no visual cues to give the reader guidance and help him structure his thoughts. Also, there are no pictures or illustrations. This can be problematic; in one study that used audio material it was noted that the lack of visuals such as charts and graphs that reinforced the reading was a major problem for comprehension in the audio condition.⁴⁹ A lack of signalling devices (e.g., bold words, italics) can also make it difficult to know what parts are important,⁵⁰ which can also have a negative effect on comprehension. Audiobooks cannot rely on layout and signalling devices, and so it is up to the narrator to convey these. For example, emphasis can be conveyed by changing intonation, and a blank line in a paper book can be communicated in an audiobook with the narrator pausing. If a narrator is not successful in conveying these elements, the listener can easily get confused or bored, which can decrease comprehension. On the other hand, prosody in audiobooks

⁴⁷ Rubery, *The Untold History Of The Talking Book*, p. 14.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ B. D. Daniel., and W.D. Woody, 'They hear, but do not listen: Retention for podcasted material in `a classroom context', *Teaching of Psychology*, 37.3 (2010), pp. 199–203.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

can also aid comprehension, as it can 'clarify the meaning of ambiguous words or help you to assign syntactic roles to words'.⁵¹

Audio also doesn't allow visual tracking. If someone wants to go back to a certain part in an audiobook, they can use the rewind button, but they cannot make use of a visual memory. In his discussion of this problem in e-books, Van der Weel states that 'the digital text consequently lacks the physical "anchoring" that paper provides' and that this makes it more difficult to 'map the text mentally', which affects retention.⁵² This also applies to audiobooks. This can make it difficult to find the part that was not properly understood, and therefore people might choose not to go back, which also doesn't aid comprehension.

Furthermore, listening to audio doesn't involve decoding symbols. In Gough and Turners Simple View, listening only consists of the language processing part, and not the decoding part. That makes listening less neurologically demanding than reading. Because there is no decoding step, listening requires less effort, and needs less focus and concentration.

Lastly, audio is linear, meaning that when listening to an audiobook the listener is confined to a fixed tempo of 'reading'. The fixed pace of the narrator leaves less room for reflection than with reading. When reading independently, the reader can go at his own pace, but with an audiobook the reader is forced to follow the tempo of the narrator, which results in what Have and Stougaard Pedersen call a 'time forced'⁵³ experience. It is not possible to 'speed up or slow down the reading according to [the person's] level of interest or concentration, as can readers of printed books.'⁵⁴ The recording must be paused when the listener wants to take a moment to digest or reflect on something which has been said. Especially when a text is particularly difficult this can be challenging if the reader needs to think about the meaning of every sentence. It is also problematic when the mind wanders. When a reader's mind wanders, he can pick up from where he left off when he stops mind wandering, because the brain cannot decode text and do something else at the same time, so if the mind wanders, the decoding process will stop. The audiobook, on the other hand, will continue to play even if the listener is not paying attention anymore. The narrator carries on relentlessly and when the listener finally realizes that he hasn't been paying attention, it is more difficult to go back to the point where the attention was lost. The listener can rewind and look for the part where the mind started to wander, but this can be difficult because, as previously mentioned, the listener

⁵¹ Willingham, 'Is Listening to an Audio book "cheating?"', n.pag.

⁵² A. H. van der Weel, 'Where will the digital turn in reading take us?', in G. Proot, D. McKittrick, A. Nuovo and P. F. Gehl (ed.) *Lux librorum: Essays on books and history for Chris Coppens* (Mechelen, Flanders Book Historical Society, 2018), pp. 229-236.

⁵³ I. Have and B. Stougaard Pedersen, 'Sonic mediatization of the book: affordances of the audiobook', *MedieKultur: Journal of media and communication research*, 29.54 (2013), pp. 123-140.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 134.

cannot see the text he wants to go back to, and it can be inconvenient to have to use the rewind button considering the fact that audiobooks listeners often are simultaneously engaged in other activities (this will be further elaborated on below). Another possibility for the listener is to accept that he missed a part of the story. Daniel and Woody found that people were less inclined to 're-listen' to a podcast, (in their study the podcasts were listened to for learning purposes, results might be different for pleasure listening), and this is probably also the case with audiobooks. When people choose not to go back or pause, it can result in less comprehension.

As we saw in Chapter 1, book reading, so long-form reading, facilitates deep reading. While audiobooks are obviously not read, they are similar to paper books in that they are long-form. Other forms of audio entertainment, like podcasts or radio, are significantly shorter, and often demand less attention and can work fine as background noise. When listening to an audiobook, the reader still needs to follow a long story, remember details that happened hours ago, follow an argument and make connections, just as with deep reading. Listening to audiobooks might thus be considered as 'deep listening'. However, the characteristics of audio described above seem to result in less opportunity for analytical thinking, focus and reflection when listening, which we saw is needed for deep reading and better comprehension. And there is another reason why deep listening is not likely to occur with audiobooks, and that has everything to do with the way people engage with them.

The distractive nature of the audiobook

In his book *The Shallows*, Nicholas Carr explains that reading online does not stimulate deep reading, because the internet has a disruptive nature and facilitates 'hyper-reading', which shortens the attention span and therefore has a negative impact on people's ability to concentrate on longer texts.⁵⁵ The internet thus contributes to the decline of long-form reading. (He wasn't the first person to come to this conclusion. Already in 1994, Sven Birkerts, who coined the term 'deep reading', made the same observation.⁵⁶) So digital reading does not stimulate deep reading,⁵⁷ but how about audiobooks?

First of all, Carr's conclusion can be extended to other forms of digital entertainment as well. The internet facilitates rapid switching between tasks, as there are so many different platforms

⁵⁵ N. G. Carr, *The shallows: What the Internet is doing to our brains*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010).

⁵⁶ S. Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The fate of reading in an electronic age*, (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994).

⁵⁷ See e.g. P. Delgado, et al. 'Don't throw away your printed books: A meta-analysis on the effects of reading media on reading comprehension', *Educational Research Review*, 25 (2018), pp. 23-38; L. M. Singer, P. A. Alexander 'Reading on Paper and Digitally: What the Past Decades of Empirical Research Reveal', *Review of Educational Research*, 87.6 (2017), pp. 1007-1041; COST E-READ 'Stavanger Declaration Concerning the Future of Reading', 2019 <<https://futureofreading.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/StavangerDeclarationPressRelease-1.pdf>> (19-4-2021).

available on one single screen, that it's tempting to quickly move on to the next thing. Our brain's attention span seems to have been shortened, not only in the case of reading, but with watching and listening too. For example, YouTube gives suggestions for other videos while a video is playing, resulting in the user being distracted by thoughts of other possibilities. Why finish watching this video if there are so many different options?

Audiobooks are also digital products, which means that the content is separate from the container, and therefore can be consumed on a multipurpose device. The consequence of this is explained by Mangen in 'Hypertext fiction reading: haptics and immersion', where she compares e-books (also a digital product) to paper books. Mangen states that 'in the e-book, the connection between the text content and the material support is split up, allowing the technological device to display a multitude of content that can be altered with a click. The book, by contrast, is a physically and functionally unitary object where the content cannot be distinguished from the material part.'⁵⁸ The book's only purpose is to be read, but a mobile phone or iPod which people might use to listen to an audiobook can have different functions. This inherently makes it more prone to distractions, as people are used to or inclined to do other things on this device.

Furthermore, audiobooks are disruptive in a different way. If people gave all their attention to audiobooks instead of purposefully engaging in other things as well, listening to an audiobook could be a concentrated experience. But audio allows people to engage in other activities, and this is a great attraction of audiobooks.

To listen to an audiobook no use of hands or eyes is needed. One major effect of having hands and eyes free when listening to an audiobook is that the reader is not confined to sitting or lying down, and can do other things simultaneously. Many people listen to audiobooks while commuting, doing chores or exercising. Have and Stougaard Pedersen call this 'turning wasted time into quality time'.⁵⁹ This is one of the most distinct differences from reading a paper book. When reading a book the reader has to sit or lie down, and usually has to hold the book. This means that it is not possible to do anything else at the same time, and this consequently forces the reader to focus on the activity of reading. Of course someone can also solely listen to an audiobook, then it would be 'concentrated listening'.⁶⁰ However, according to surveys that have been conducted among audiobook readers, most people are not concentrated listeners and do engage in other (simple)

⁵⁸ A. Mangen, 'Hypertext fiction reading: haptics and immersion', *Journal of research in reading*, 31.4 (2008), p. 406.

⁵⁹ I. Have, and B. Stougaard Pedersen, *Digital Audiobooks: New Media, Users, and Experiences*, (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 138.

⁶⁰ Rubery, *The Untold History Of The Talking Book*, p. 19.

activities whilst listening to an audiobook⁶¹ (this is further elaborated on in Chapter 4). Those activities might not be very demanding, but they do require some engagement, which can distract from listening to the story. Unfortunately, this leads to a lot of 'fragmented listening'; instead of quickly switching from one story to another, as you would do reading online perhaps, you switch between listening to the story and giving attention to another activity.

Survey research shows that people do engage in other activities while reading a book as well. One study conducted among Dutch readers reported that for more than half of the consumers, the radio is sometimes turned on while reading a book and distractions caused by the mobile phone are also common. Other competing activities include texting, using social media, watching television, reading or writing emails, surfing the internet, visiting news sites or reading a newspaper, reading a magazine and gaming (both online and offline).⁶² However, this kind of 'multitasking'⁶³ is not quite the same, as it is not possible to read and do something else at the same time, and it's not like an audiobook that keeps on going while the listener might not be listening anymore.

According to Wolfgramm et al., you need to 'actively focus', 'blocking out other stimuli' in order to comprehend something. 'Concentration is therefore key for this focused active process of listening',⁶⁴ they say, and concentration is precisely what might be lacking when multitasking while listening to audiobooks.

So it looks as if it is not realistic to expect that deep reading is replaced by deep listening when listening to audiobooks. It can be said that the less concentrated a person is on the material, the less he will comprehend and remember. Indeed in one study about mind wandering the results showed that listening to material led to more mind wandering than silent reading (reading aloud led to the least amount of mind wandering),⁶⁵ and that this led to decreased memory performance and less comprehension. Mind wandering was not connected to multitasking in the study, but the fact that the eyes are 'free' also makes the listener prone to be distracted by visuals if he doesn't close his

⁶¹ D. Mohoric, 'How popular are audiobooks with young professionals?', *SurveyMonkey* <<https://www.surveymonkey.com/curiosity/how-popular-are-audiobooks-with-young-professionals/>> (31-8-2020); B. D. Moore, 'Audiobook Statistics Reveals How Experts Use Audiobooks', *Greatworklife*, 2020 <<https://www.greatworklife.com/how-to-listen-to-audiobooks-statistics/>> (31-8-2020); Hebban Crew. 'Infographic: het luisterboek in 2017', n.pag.

⁶² S. Peters and S. van Strien, 'Rapportage Boekenbranche Meting 47', *GfK*, 2019, p. 19 <<https://www.kvbboekwerk.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/2019-smb-gfk-meting-47-regulier.pdf>> (31-8-2020).

⁶³ While in this thesis I use the term 'multitasking', 'real' multitasking doesn't exist, rather it's a matter of rapid task switching, or in the case of listening and competing activities: rapid attention switching.

⁶⁴ C. Wolfgramm, N. Suter and E. Göksel, 'Examining the role of concentration, vocabulary and self-concept in listening and reading comprehension', *International Journal of Listening*, 30 (2016), p. 26.

⁶⁵ T.L Varao Sousa, J. S. Carriere, and D. Smilek, 'The way we encounter reading material influences how frequently we mind wander', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4 (2013).

eyes, even when he is not purposefully engaging in another activity. The researchers observed that 'one's ability to stay focused on the task may be jeopardized, as the mind begins to wander off to other information that happens to capture the attention of our unencumbered eyes.' In a Dutch survey people rated the audiobook lower than the paper book in terms of being able to remember the story and being able to concentrate on the story,⁶⁶ further indicating that listening to audiobooks doesn't improve concentration and memory as much as reading. However, another study showed no significant differences in comprehension between listening and reading,⁶⁷ so research remains inconclusive.

To sum up, the cognitive effects that have been observed to occur after reading books are probably less with audiobooks, due to the characteristics of audio and the digital nature of the audiobook, though more research should be done on this. Comparative studies would be particularly helpful.

2.2 Do the social-emotional effects of reading also occur with listening?

Empathy

For the most part, there shouldn't be much difference in being empathetic towards characters in a paper book or audiobook. However, empathy might be linked to imagination. It may be the case that the more imagination you need to exercise, the more empathetic you become. Van der Weel suggests that the level of empathy is less with movies and series because the viewer needs a lot less imagination.⁶⁸ A recent study found that listening to audiobooks was more 'cognitively and emotionally engaging at a physiological level' than watching films or television, even though the subjects thought they were more engaged in the movie.⁶⁹ This is linked to imagination in the study, and although this study didn't look specifically at empathy, it does show that audiobooks are at least more emotionally engaging than movies and thus may elicit more empathy. Whether this is actually the case, and whether the degree of empathy then is the same as or less than with reading has not yet been studied, but one aspect of audiobooks might cause them to have a lesser effect on empathy than paper books. Compared to movies, both printed books and audiobooks require a stronger sense

⁶⁶ E.g. N. Nagelhout, 'Rapportage Boekenbranche Meting 52', *GfK*, 2019, p. 13
<https://www.kvbboekwerk.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/753470-Rapportage-Boekenbranche-M52_2.0.pdf> (3-12-2020).

⁶⁷ B. A. Rogowsky, B. M. Calhoun, and P. Tallal, 'Does modality matter? The effects of reading, listening, and dual modality on comprehension', *SAGE Open*, 6. (2016).

⁶⁸ Van der Weel, 'Where will the digital turn in reading take us?', p. 234.

⁶⁹ D. C. Richardson, et al., 'Engagement in video and audio narratives: contrasting self-report and physiological measures', *Scientific Reports*, 10.1 (2020), pp. 1-8.

of imagination. For example, the appearance of the characters, surroundings and everything else needs to be visualized by the reader, whereas in a movie this is all done for you. But what the paper book doesn't have, and the audiobook does, is a narrator who consciously and unconsciously colours in some aspects of the story that otherwise are neutral. A character that is portrayed by a voice actor in an audiobook can sound very different than you would have imagined inside your head. The voice of the narrator, prosody, and the different voices a narrator might give to different characters, provide an interpretation of the text,⁷⁰ which we would normally have to give ourselves. When listening to an audiobook the listener thus needs slightly less imagination compared to reading a book.

This could mean that listening to audiobooks elicits less empathy than reading paper books, if empathy is indeed connected to imagination. But this difference would probably be marginal.

Wellbeing

Research has found some indications that listening to audiobooks improves wellbeing. Poerio and Totterdell investigated the effect of audiobooks on various aspects of wellbeing, and found that listening to audiobooks can have a positive effect on wellbeing, provided the participants are absorbed in the material.⁷¹ One reason why an audiobook might have a positive effect on wellbeing is because of the 'social' aspect of an audiobook: being in the company of another voice, which Have and Stougaard Peterson call 'parasocial contact'. 'The presence of a calm human voice has since (and even before) birth had a calming effect on us', they say.⁷² This might explain why there were no significant differences in effects on wellbeing between reading fiction and non-fiction books. However, it did matter how 'absorbed' the listener was: 'the more absorbed [the participants] were when listening during the first two weeks of the study, the higher their levels of meaning in life, mental wellbeing, and the lower their levels of loneliness during the subsequent two weeks.'⁷³ If being absorbed is crucial to improving wellbeing, this is a potential disadvantage for audiobooks because readers might not engage as deeply with them as with paper books, as we saw earlier, because the characteristics of audiobooks allow people to multitask.

So listening to audiobooks probably has a similar effect on wellbeing as reading books has and is possibly even more relaxing. While listening you can close your eyes, and this can give a more relaxing experience. Additionally, listening to an audiobook involves no decoding, just language

⁷⁰ Rubery, *The Untold History Of The Talking Book*, p. 10.

⁷¹ G. Poerio and P. Totterdell, 'The effect of fiction on the well-being of older adults: a longitudinal RCT intervention study using audiobooks', *Psychosocial Intervention*, 29.1 (2020), pp. 29-38.

⁷² I. Have and B. Stougaard Pedersen, 'Conceptualising the audiobook experience', *SoundEffects-An Interdisciplinary Journal of Sound and Sound Experience* 2.2 (2012), p. 90.

⁷³ Poerio and Totterdell, 'The effect of fiction on the well-being of older adults', p. 34.

processing. This means that listening to a book requires less effort than reading a book and that can also make listening to an audiobook more relaxing and therefore more enjoyable (this is further elaborated on in Chapter 4), which in turn can have a positive effect on someone's wellbeing.

Overall, the social-emotional effects that have been observed to occur after reading books seem to be similar for listening to audiobooks. In addition, listening to audiobooks may even be more relaxing than reading books.

3. Reading goals

In this chapter the most common goals for leisure book reading are outlined. The focus will be on intrinsic reading motivation and not extrinsic reading motivation (i.e., reading for external reasons; e.g., for school or work). The aim is to discover why adults choose to read a book. In Chapter 4 it will be discussed whether audiobook listeners have or are likely to have the same goals when they listen to a book.

There have been several studies that investigated adults' main goals for reading. A 1980s study by Kirsch and Guthrie⁷⁴ found three main reasons for adults to read in leisure time: relaxation, keeping abreast and knowledge, with most time spend on reading for relaxation, then for keeping abreast and lastly for knowledge. Fifteen years later, Stokmans⁷⁵ defined three categories of adults' motivation for reading: development/utility, enjoyment and escape. Enjoyment was the main reason for reading, followed by escape and lastly development/utility. Another ten years later Chen⁷⁶ distinguished reading for enjoyment, for knowledge, for relaxation, and for social conversation. In his study he looked at Taiwanese readers and found to his surprise that adult Taiwanese more often read non-narrative books than narrative books, and that 'reading books provides knowledge' was the statement they most agreed with, followed by 'reading books provides topics for social conversation', then 'reading books provides relaxation' and lastly 'reading books provides enjoyment', which contradicts the findings in Kirsch and Guthrie's and Stokmans' research. There may be cultural differences at play here, perhaps tied in with social desirability.

In a recent survey among Dutch consumers⁷⁷ people were asked what their reading goals were. The reasons they gave for reading were: 'to relax', 'to dream away', 'to immerse myself in the world of stories', 'to feel at ease', 'to learn more about certain topics', 'to develop myself personally', 'to broaden my horizon and my view of the world', 'to not be bored', 'to develop intellectually', 'to enjoy language', 'to feel more emotionally comfortable', 'to be aware of what's going on in the world', and 'to give me a position in society' (it was possible to give multiple answers).

All the goals that were defined by Kirsch and Guthrie, Stokmans and Chen are reflected in the answers of the respondents, and they mentioned other reasons too. It must be noted that the

⁷⁴ I. S. Kirsch, and J. T Guthrie, 'Adults reading practices for work and leisure', *Adult Education Quarterly* 34.4 (1984), pp. 1213-232.

⁷⁵ M. J. W. Stokmans, 'Reading attitude and its effect on leisure time reading', *Poetics*, 26.4 (1999), pp. 245-261.

⁷⁶ S. Chen, 'Functions of reading and adults' reading interests', *Reading Improvement*, 46.2 (2009), pp. 108-117.

⁷⁷ Peters and Van Strien, 'Rapportage Boekenbranche Meting 47', p. 17.

categories in the studies were provided by the researchers, while it is not clear if the answers in the survey were predefined. However, it seems likely that the respondents were given a number of answers to choose from, as there is also a category 'something else' (*anders*).

Kirsch and Guthrie's, Stockmans' and Chen's categories were used as basis for the categorization below, but their categories are not comprehensive, so the answers of the respondents were used to compliment them. Kirsch and Guthrie only mention relaxation but not enjoyment or escape. They also had keeping abreast and knowledge as two separate categories, but keeping abreast can fall under knowledge. Stockmans talked about development/utility, and not knowledge, but this can fall under knowledge as well. The same goes for self-development, which was mentioned in the survey. Furthermore, Stockmans didn't include relaxation and categorized enjoyment and escape separately, but enjoyment and escape can be put in one category because 'escaping' in this sense is often a pleasant experience. The same is true for 'relaxing'. Enjoyment/escape/relaxation is an important category because relaxing was the most-given reason for reading in Kirsch and Guthrie's study, and by far the most popular answer given by the respondents in the survey, while enjoyment was the main reason for reading in Stokmans' study. Knowledge is also important: Chen's subjects listed reading to gain knowledge as the most important reason to read. Chen also had reading for social conversation as a category, and this can be seen as a separate category; it is an intrinsic motivation, but it is different from the others as it is more focused on (impressing) other people rather than on the reader's own personal benefit. None of the studies mentioned having a literary experience, but this was mentioned in the Dutch survey, where 16% of the respondents said they read to enjoy language, so while this isn't one of the main reasons to read, it is a distinct reason that is worth mentioning.

Combining all the reasons to read mentioned in the studies and in the survey, the following categories are defined to discuss further:

Reading for:

- enjoyment/escape/relaxation
- knowledge/keeping abreast/self-development
- a literary experience
- social conversation

3.1 Enjoyment/escape/relaxation

Research suggests that reading for enjoyment and relaxation is the most common reading goal. Of course, many people read because it is an enjoyable experience. Books can be funny, exciting,

captivating, moving and can evoke a lot of emotions. Some readers may read to get away from their daily lives, to dream away, escape, or just because they have nothing else to do and reading is a form of entertainment. Reading for enjoyment or relaxation is more connected to fiction, as non-fiction is often seen as more serious and demanding, but of course there is a difference between difficult and complex non-fiction and digestible popular science, so reading for entertainment or relaxation is definitely not exclusive to fiction.

It is also clear that people read to relax and escape from their life. In the Hebban survey 80% of the respondents said they read to relax and 40% said they read to 'dream away'. Reading can be a way to withdraw from the world and escape life, thoughts and problems. It can be a moment to make yourself comfortable, wind down and destress.

3.2 Knowledge/keeping abreast/self-development

Another important reading goal is to obtain knowledge. Non-fiction books in particular are often read with the aim to learn more about a certain topic. The goal of the reader is to make himself more knowledgeable and perhaps to be able to participate in certain conversations about a specific subject. Another popular genre within non-fiction is self-help books. Many people read self-help books to improve themselves or their lives. Self-help books can be inspirational and include personal anecdotes which make people feel a connection to others and help them realize they are not the only ones with the same problems. They can also be very practical, with exercises and challenges. People can also read to keep abreast, and though newspapers might be more suited for this goal, books can also be read to keep up with current events.

Besides reading to learn about specific topics, some people may read widely to broaden their horizon and their view of the world, as was mentioned by the Dutch survey respondents. In this case the reader is not reading with a specific topic in mind, but to improve his general knowledge. Both reading fiction and non-fiction can improve general knowledge. Some genres within fiction lend themselves more for this than others, for example realistic fiction and historical fiction. But every fiction story can expand the reader's knowledge, as it exposes the reader to new worlds and ideas and gives him an insight into other people's minds.

3.3 A literary experience

Some readers enjoy literature as an art form. They are less concerned about the plot or getting practical information, but rather they enjoy the effect words have on them and the experience of reading, especially with literature and poetry. In his essay 'Longing for Books', Carl Leggo says

'reading is not consumption or interpretation; reading is a way of living in words with artful and heartfelt attention to wonder.'⁷⁸ He expresses it thus: 'When I read a book I am not trying to consume the meaning of the book. I am not seeking a nugget of wisdom I can pin to the refrigerator door to guide me in life's journey. When I read, I riff on words and connections between words, and connections between words and worlds.'⁷⁹

3.4 Social conversation

Lastly, reading can provide topics for social conversation. Reading for social conversation can be aimed at being able to show off, or keep up with others. For example, someone who reads a bestseller because everyone in their social circle has read it, and they feel like they should too. Others may simply read to boast about how many books they've read to seem sophisticated. In Chen's study, where participants listed reading for social conversation as the second most important reading goal, reading bestsellers was linked to reading for social conversation. These are books that are most often talked about, and important to know of or have read when the goal is to participate in a conversation about books, or to show how well-read you are. However, reading for social conversation wasn't mentioned in any of the other studies nor in the survey, so it might be particularly important in certain cultural climates.

⁷⁸ C. Leggo, 'Longing for books: Reasons for reading literature', *English in Australia*, 46.2 (2011), pp. 37-45.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 43.

4. Audiobook motivation

In this chapter we look at audiobook motivation. In the first part we look at what reasons people give for choosing the audiobook format, and where and when people listen to audiobooks. The outcomes are connected to the characteristics of audio, and to the audiobook specifically. With those explanations in mind we then attempt to establish, in the second part of this chapter, whether or not the reading goals from Chapter 3 also apply to listening goals.

4.1 Motivation for the audiobook format

4.1.1 Why do people choose audiobooks?

What motivates people to choose an audiobook instead of a paper book? There are several reasons identified by audiobook users in questionnaires.

In a Hebban survey in 2017 conducted among Dutch people, respondents gave the following reasons for listening instead of reading (they could give multiple reasons): ‘so I can listen whilst doing something else’ (by far the most popular answer: 63% agreed with this), ‘by listening the story comes more alive for me’ (11%), ‘so I can consume more books’ (11%), ‘I like listening more than reading’ (7%), ‘I am not able to read a book’ (33%), ‘other reason’ (33%).⁸⁰

In the APA annual consumer research survey of 2018, the main reason people said they enjoyed audiobooks was ‘so they can do other things while listening’ (81%), followed by ‘they can listen wherever they are’ (80%), and ‘audiobooks are portable’ (75%) in third place.⁸¹

In both the Hebban and the APA survey, ‘being able to listen whilst doing something else’ was the number one motivation. But compared to the answers in the Dutch survey, the answers given in the APA survey are less clear. Being able to listen wherever you are and audiobooks being portable are intertwined and can be seen as parts of one reason. You could say that a person is able to listen to an audiobook wherever they are, *because* audiobooks are portable. But how relevant is this, as the same is true for paper books, which are also portable and in principle can be read anywhere? What makes audiobooks different is that there is more opportunity for listening because besides being portable, they can also be consumed without the use of hands or eyes, for example while driving. Perhaps this is what respondents mean when they say ‘wherever’, but that would derive from being able to do other things while listening. So you could say that being able to ‘listen

⁸⁰ Hebban Crew. ‘Infographic: het luisterboek in 2017’, n.pag.

⁸¹ Audio Publishers Association, ‘Consumer Sales Survey Final’, 2018

<<https://www.audiopub.org/uploads/pdf/2018-Consumer-Sales-Survey-Final-PR.pdf>> (8-10-2020).

wherever they are' results from 'doing other things while listening' and 'audiobooks being portable'. Also, not all forms of audiobooks are portable, though in 2018 only 3.8% of audiobooks were sold in CD format, compared to 95.4% in digital format.⁸² Maybe the fact that audiobooks are much easier to carry and take up no space (because multiple books can be stored on one small device compared to having to lug heavy individual books around) also plays a part in the portability factor, but this remains unclear.

The APA annual consumers' survey of 2019 reveals that '40% of audiobook listeners agree that audiobooks help them get through more books, and 56% of those who both listen to and read books agree that audiobooks are the preferred format to get through books quickly',⁸³ so consume more books in the same amount of time. This might seem odd, as most readers can read faster than the narrator reads out loud, but there is more opportunity for listening, so that is why they get through books quicker. (Interestingly, only 11% of the Dutch audiobook users gave being able to consume more books as a reason, opposed to 40% in the APA survey. This could be due to cultural differences. However, 63% did give being able to do something else as a reason, which does give people the opportunity to get through more books faster, but this might not necessarily be the goal.) Furthermore, in the APA survey of 2018, 73% of audiobook users found listening to audiobooks relaxing and 55% said they listen to an audiobook to have time to themselves.⁸⁴

In the UK, 54% of the respondents of the Kantar survey listen to audiobooks because of their convenience, and 41% because it allows them to consume books when reading print isn't possible.⁸⁵ Here again, some questions come up. It is not apparent what convenience means here exactly. Is convenience being able to do other things at the same time? Or is convenience that you can store many books on one device and access them easily, without it taking up any space? Is meant by consuming books when reading print isn't possible, that multitasking is possible, because then you can listen when you would otherwise not be able to read? Or that people who are blind or visually impaired can access these books? This isn't clear.

In another UK study, from Nielsen Book, convenience and multitasking is one category, so convenience seems to refer to being able to multitask in this study. In the 'Reading for pleasure' report it states that 'convenience/multi-tasking is the most important factor causing people to listen to audiobooks more (46% of all audiobook consumers and 49% for heavy buyers).'⁸⁶ Another thing

⁸² Audio Publishers Association, 'Audiobook Industry Sales Survey Key Points 2015-2019'.

⁸³ Audio Publishers Association, 'Consumer Survey Press Release'.

⁸⁴ Audio Publishers Association, 'Consumer Sales Survey Final'.

⁸⁵ J. Joynson, 'Consumers embrace audio for reading on the go', 2019, n.pag.

<<https://www.publishers.org.uk/consumers-embrace-audio-for-reading-on-the-go-2/>> (3-12-2020).

⁸⁶ Woodley and Mantell, 'Reading for Pleasure An Evidence Review', p .31.

that is mentioned is that listeners ‘enjoy the narrative experience’; they ‘find it relaxing’ and say it ‘helps to bring the book to life’.⁸⁷ They also find that listening to audiobooks ‘gives them a new perspective on a book’, but this is mostly said by heavy buyers, who relatively listen more to multi-cast dramatizations (which are not included in this discussion), which often have enhancements added to the story, such as music and sound effects – something that can give people a new perspective on a book if they have also read the paper version.

It is clear that the reasons for choosing an audiobook are not straightforward and clear-cut, and some may be counted as the same reason. However, based on the survey results it is possible to make a list of the most common reasons. People read because:

- they can listen whilst doing something else, i.e. multitask (listen wherever they are)
- they can consume more books because multitasking is possible
- they find listening to audiobooks relaxing
- they are not able to read a book
- they enjoy the narration
- they find listening more enjoyable than reading

Something else that was not clearly mentioned in the surveys but is likely a reason:

- They find it convenient, as audiobooks do not take up space

From the survey results it can be concluded that being able to multitask (doing other things at the same time as listening) and being able to consume more books are the most important reasons for choosing the audiobook format. Also listening to audiobooks because it’s relaxing comes up as an important reason.

4.1.2 When and where do people listen to audiobooks?

Data about where and when people listen to audiobooks can also say a lot about why they listen. The number one reason people give for opting for an audiobook is the ability to multitask so they can listen whenever they want. So what are people doing when they listen to audiobooks? First of all, while multitasking is the main reason why people like audiobooks, research shows that many people listen to audiobooks in bed. In the Nielsen Book Research study they found that ‘audiobook

⁸⁷ Woodley and Mantell, ‘Reading for Pleasure An Evidence Review’, p. 22.

consumers mainly listen during spare time and in bed'.⁸⁸ The highest percentage of people (39%) in the Hebban survey reported to mainly listen to audiobooks in bed,⁸⁹ which is interesting because 63% of the respondents said being able to do different things while listening is a reason for choosing an audiobook.

The rest of the time people engage in other activities whilst listening to an audiobook. Among the Hebban survey respondents, the most popular spot after the bed was the car (37%). People also listen in the living room (29%), whilst doing chores around the house (28%), on holiday (28%), walking (18%), on public transport (17%), on the plane (13%), in the kitchen (13%), whilst exercising (11%), behind the computer (9%) and on the bicycle (9%).⁹⁰

It's important to note that some of these are activities (e.g. doing chores), while others are places (in the living room, in the kitchen), so again these answers can be interpreted in various ways. A person could be doing chores in the living room, but could also just be sitting down and listening, whereas in the kitchen someone is probably cooking or cleaning whilst listening. 'In the car' is a broader category than 'while driving', for example, as you can listen to an audiobook when you are not driving but are still in the car. 'On holiday' is very broad, you could be doing anything.

In the APA annual surveys this issue arises too. In 2018, 53% of the respondents said they most often listen at home and 36% say their car is where they listen most often.⁹¹ 'At home' is still very broad, as the top three activities while listening to audiobooks reveal. After 'driving' (65%), 'relaxing before going to sleep' (52%) and 'doing housework/chores' (45%) are the top activities.⁹² So relaxing before going to sleep and doing housework both fall under 'home', but are two separate activities (if you could call relaxing an activity).

In the APA surveys of 2019 and 2020 the car was the most popular place to listen to audiobooks while the home came second.⁹³ However, it must be noted that while the car was the place where most people listened, people listened for longer period of times in their homes.

So it seems that overall the car (commuting) is a popular spot, as are other forms of travel like walking and taking public transport. Besides this the home is named as popular spot, but this can range from listening in bed to doing chores.

This information about when and where people listen to audiobooks confirms some of the statements made by people about why they choose an audiobook. During a commute is named as a

⁸⁸ Woodley and Mantell, 'Reading for Pleasure An Evidence Review', p. 31.

⁸⁹ Hebban Crew. 'Infographic: het luisterboek in 2017', n.pag.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Audio Publishers Association, 'Consumer Sales Survey Final', 2018.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Audio Publishers Association, 'Consumer Survey Press Release'; Audio Publishers Association, 'Consumer Survey and 2019 Sales Survey Press Release'.

popular time to listen. In many cases combining reading a book and commuting (for example driving) wouldn't be possible, so this is an advantage of the audiobook. It reflects the high percentage of people who say they like listening to audiobooks because they can do something else in the meantime. Furthermore, the fact that many people listen in bed, to relax before going to sleep, confirms that listening being relaxing is a main motivation for listening to audiobooks as well.

4.1.3 Motivation for the audiobook format in relation to the characteristics of the audiobook

The reasons why people like audiobooks can be explained by a number of characteristics of audio and the audiobook specifically. Below these characteristics will be discussed for each reason (reasons that are similar or associated with each other are combined).

1)

- They can listen whilst doing something else (multitasking)
- They can consume more books because multitasking is possible

As was already established in Chapter 2, people can listen whilst doing something else because with audio there is no need to see and the hands are free, so multitasking is possible. While multitasking can lead to less attention being given to the story, as seen in Chapter 2, it is an often-mentioned motivation for people to listen to an audiobook, so they clearly see it as a benefit. Because multitasking is possible, people can consume more books because there are more opportunities to 'read'. This is also an important motivation for people to choose an audiobook, as discussed earlier.

2)

- They are not able to read a book

Because there is no need to see or to read, visually impaired, illiterate and dyslexic people don't have the barriers that they have with a paper book. As these people are not able to read a book or really struggle with it, and they are able to listen to an audiobook, naturally this is a reason for them to choose an audiobook.

3)

- They enjoy the narration
- They find listening more enjoyable than reading
- They find listening to audiobooks relaxing

One important aspect of the audiobook is the narrator. With audiobooks, the voice and the narration style has a huge influence how the listener perceives and remembers the story. 'The speaker's voice is the audiobook's greatest virtue and liability',⁹⁴ says Rubery. Commercial audiobook narrators usually try to bring the story to life by changing intonation and volume accordingly, and sometimes by giving different voices to different characters. If a listener does not like the voice or narration, this can negatively influence their opinion of the book. But it can work the other way around as well. When the voice is perceived as pleasant and the style fits the story well, this can work in the book's favour, and can make for a higher appreciation of the story. Actress and renowned audiobook narrator Barbara Rosenblat goes so far as to say that 'a gifted audiobook recording artist can elevate less than stellar writing to someplace very new'.⁹⁵ It's even possible that people like the narrator so much that they look for other books that they have narrated, instead of looking for new books they would like to read. The narrator can make the story more enjoyable, or ruin it. That is why it is so important for audiobook publishers to select the perfect voice for an audiobook.

Besides the narrator's voice being enjoyable to listen to, it can also be soothing. 'The voice in your ears produces effects of intimacy, as well as giving the user a sense of present social company',⁹⁶ say Have and Stougaard Pedersen in their exploration of affordances of the audiobook. 'We assume that, for users, it is not just the literal experience but also a feeling of casual parasocial company (...) and comfort that makes the audiobook attractive.'⁹⁷ This might be why people like to listen to audiobooks in bed and fall asleep to an audiobook. They might just be listening to a soothing voice rather than following a story. Listening to an audiobook can therefore be a less focused activity, and the audiobook can function as background noise instead.

Also, because the eyes can be closed while listening and no reading is necessary, which makes listening cognitively less demanding, listening can be more relaxing, which in turn can also

⁹⁴ Rubery, *The Untold Story of the Talking Book*, p. 8.

⁹⁵ The takeaway, 'The Power of Listening: Examining the Rise of Audiobooks', 9 August, 2016. Podcast available on <<https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/takeaway/segments/audiobooks-and-power-listening?>> (31-8-2020).

⁹⁶ Have and Stougaard Pedersen, 'Sonic mediatization of the book: affordances of the audiobook', p. 135.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

make it more enjoyable. More enjoyment and relaxation are important reasons to listen to an audiobook.

4)

- They find it convenient, as audiobooks do not take up space

The fact that audiobooks don't take up space and therefore can be viewed as convenient, cannot be explained by characteristics of audio, but rather by audiobooks being digital. Because they are digital, they do not take up any space in the physical realm, and multiple audiobooks can be stored on one device, or audiobooks can be streamed. This means that people can take an infinite number of books with them, which of course is convenient.

It also means that a digital audiobook can be listened to an infinite number of times without diminishing the quality, provided that the carrier is undamaged, unlike the paper book that suffers from usage, and may acquire spills or stains, colours may fade from light, and pages may yellow throughout the years. 'Digital content does not deteriorate over time (permanence), although the medium in which it is stored may do so.'⁹⁸ This can also contribute to a listener's motivation regarding convenience.

4.2 Listening goals

In the first part of this chapter we looked at the reasons people give for choosing audiobooks and when and where they listen to them, and explained the outcomes by looking at the characteristics of the audiobook. Now we will look back at the reading goals from Chapter 3 and see if research shows that these goals are the same for audiobooks. If there is no research available, a reasoned assessment will be made about whether it is likely that the goal is the same for listening to a book, or different, keeping in mind the characteristics of the audiobook identified in chapters 2 and 4.1. We begin with a short note on genre: do listeners more often choose fiction or non-fiction compared to readers, or is there no difference?

⁹⁸ J. Rowley, 'Understanding digital content marketing', *Journal of Marketing Management* 24, 5–6 (2008), pp. 524-525.

Genre

Fiction is more popular than non-fiction among listeners. In the Hebban survey non-fiction turned out to be least popular⁹⁹ and in a KVB survey almost all non-fiction readers say they read from paper while only 8% listens to it.¹⁰⁰ Other research also shows that audiobook users listen to fiction more often than non-fiction.¹⁰¹ In the Netherlands the most popular genres are suspense (thriller, detective, horror).¹⁰² This is similar to the US, where the number one genre for the last three years has been mysteries/thrillers/suspense.¹⁰³ Similarly, in the UK the most popular genre was crime/thriller/adventure.¹⁰⁴ These statistics might lead to the conclusion that non-fiction is less popular with audiobooks compared to paper books, and that 'easy' genres, in the sense that they are easily digestible, are more popular. However, these results might just be a reflection of overall preference as research has found that in general fiction is more popular, and there is no clear evidence that non-fiction is less popular in the form of audiobooks than with paper books.¹⁰⁵ Also, the most popular genres for audiobooks – crime/thriller – are similar for printed books.¹⁰⁶

In the US, non-fiction for audio is gaining popularity. In 2015 fiction books made up approximately three-quarters of audiobook sales in 2015 and non-fiction a quarter, but by 2019 this changed to 60.9% fiction and 39.1% non-fiction.¹⁰⁷ So non-fiction is making a steep climb, but this is also happening for non-fiction books in general.¹⁰⁸ Consequently, we may conclude that there is no noticeable difference for a non-fiction or fiction preference between book reading and audiobook listening.

⁹⁹ Hebban Crew, 'Infographic: het luisterboek in 2017', n.pag.

¹⁰⁰ S. Peters, N. Nagelhout, 'Rapportage Boekenbranche Meting 48', *GfK*, 2019, p. 33
<<https://www.kvbboekwerk.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/2019-smb-gfk-meting-48-genres.pdf>>

¹⁰¹ E.g. Audio Publishers Association, 'Consumer Survey and 2019 Sales Survey Press Release'; Nagelhout, 'Rapportage Boekenbranche Meting 52'.

¹⁰² S. Peters, S. van Strien, 'Rapportage Boekenbranche Meting 46', *GfK*, 2018, p. 29.
<<https://www.kvbboekwerk.nl/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/2018-smb-gfk-meting-46-digitaal.pdf>> (3-12-2020).

¹⁰³ Audio Publishers Association, 'Consumer Sales Survey Final'; Audio Publishers Association, 'Consumer Survey Press Release'; Audio Publishers Association, 'Consumer Survey and 2019 Sales Survey Press Release'.

¹⁰⁴ Woodley and Mantell, 'Reading for Pleasure An Evidence Review'.

¹⁰⁵ E.g. Peters, van Strien, 'Rapportage Boekenbranche Meting 46', p. 29; Audio Publishers Association, 'Consumer Sales Survey Final'; Audio Publishers Association, 'Consumer Survey Press Release'; Audio Publishers Association, 'Consumer Survey and 2019 Sales Survey Press Release'.

¹⁰⁶ Peters, van Strien, 'Rapportage Boekenbranche Meting 46'; Peters and Nagelhout, 'Rapportage Boekenbranche Meting 48', p. 40.

¹⁰⁷ Audio Publishers Association, 'Audiobook Industry Sales Survey Key Points 2015-2019'.

¹⁰⁸ Association of American Publishers, 'Book Publisher Revenue Estimated at \$25.8 Billion in 2018', 2019, n.pag. <<https://publishers.org/news/book-publisher-revenue-estimated-at-25-8-billion-in-2018/>> (3-12-2020).

4.2.1 Enjoyment/escape/relaxing

In the first part of this chapter it has already been established that people listen because they find it enjoyable and relaxing, so this is clearly a listening goal. Some people say that they enjoy the audiobook more than the paper book. However there is also research that indicates that people enjoy listening less than reading, and also find it less relaxing. For example, in a recent Dutch survey¹⁰⁹ respondents gave paper books a higher rating for relaxation than audiobooks. It may be that readers associate reading a book with silent alone time and an opportunity to slow down, whereas listening to books more often involves doing other activities, which might be perceived as less relaxing. In another study, results showed that participants were less interested in the material when they were listening to it.¹¹⁰ It was argued that the lack of interest may stem from being less engaged, as they also found a higher rate of mind wandering. It might be true that people enjoy the audiobook provided that they make an effort to concentrate on the material.

On the other hand, they also might enjoy an audiobook more, precisely because they don't have to concentrate as much on it. The same is true for relaxation (as is explained in 4.1.3). Listening eliminates the process of decoding symbols and is inherently less demanding. Because you can listen with your eyes closed, it can be a more relaxing experience. Also, as Have and Stougaard Peterson pointed out, audiobooks also provide parasocial contact and 'many users listen to audiobooks not only to get a literary experience, but also to be entertained or maybe above all to be in good company and feel good.'¹¹¹ In a paper book, unless the narrator is the author (e.g. with memoirs) or an omniscient narrator that addresses the reader directly, for example in many of Roald Dahl's books, the reader usually lacks a connection with the narrator in the 'real world'. The reader can identify with the narrator, perhaps more if the story is told from the first-person perspective, but the parasocial contact as defined by Have and Stougaard Peterson is not present. In this respect, to relax might even be a more important reading goal for listening to audiobooks than it is for reading.

4.2.2 Knowledge/keeping abreast/self-development

Is gaining knowledge also a goal for people who listen to audiobooks, as it is for people who read books? People may avoid listening to difficult non-fiction books, as they can be harder to follow. As we saw in Chapter 2, the listener is restricted to a particular speed, which can make it more difficult to go back in the book if he missed something or doesn't understand something. Also, an audiobook cannot have illustrative pictures or graphs. For this reason it may not be possible for some books that

¹⁰⁹ Nagelhout, 'Rapportage Boekenbranche Meting 52', p. 13.

¹¹⁰ Varao Sousa et al., 'The way we encounter reading material influences how frequently we mind wander'.

¹¹¹ Have and Stougaard Pedersen, 'Conceptualising the audiobook experience', p. 90.

rely on those things to exist as an audiobook. Also practical books, for example self-help books with exercises or white spaces to write your answers or thoughts, do not lend themselves to audio.

On the other hand, people may find a book with a tough subject too challenging to read, but less daunting to listen to. As we have seen, non-fiction is growing in popularity with audiobook users, and this has to do with the overall growth in non-fiction, but it may also have helped that more types of books have become available in audio format. In the past, some books were not regarded as appropriate for audio, especially difficult non-fiction books. But nowadays ‘even the densest of subjects are finding audio success – sometimes given a helping hand by a well-known narrator’,¹¹² according to Richard Lennon from Penguin Audio. As an example he gives Benedict Cumberbatch’s reading of Carlo Rovelli’s *The Order of Time*, which ‘no doubt attracted a few listeners who might not normally opt for a book about quantum physics.’¹¹³ ‘Not that long ago, a book on theoretical physics would likely not have been released in audio at all,’ says Lennon.¹¹⁴

Also, if the goal is to obtain a lot of general information, audiobooks can be particularly attractive for people because listening allows them to consume books faster, as there are more opportunities to listen than to read.

4.2.3 A literary experience

Do listeners also aim to have a literary experience? They might, but perhaps in a different way than with reading. Reading involves a decoding process, while listening doesn’t. According to Willingham, if the purpose of reading is not decoding, reading and listening is basically the same thing.¹¹⁵ But he overlooks the fact that the decoding process is not just a means to an end; it also ensures that the reader focuses on the act of reading. After all, decoding takes effort and forces the reader’s attention to the reading activity. Besides, because it takes effort, it is a process that allows you to slow down and ponder the words. The reader is free to engage with words at their chosen speed. Engaging with a story in this way is exclusive to actual reading. According to Willingham, if the point of reading is appreciating language and the story, it can just as well be achieved by listening. But the decoding process might be a requisite for appreciating the language and the story, precisely because it allows the reader to slow down and reflect.

On the other hand, having text read aloud, for example poetry, can add a new dimension, e.g. a new interpretation to the text (influenced by the narrator). Audiobooks can be literature in

¹¹² C. Thorp, ‘Audiobooks: The rise and rise of the books you don’t read’, (2020), n.pag. <<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20200104-audiobooks-the-rise-and-rise-of-the-books-you-dont-read>> (8-10-2020).

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Willingham, ‘Is Listening to an Audio book “cheating?”’, n.pag.

another way. Therefore, having a literary experience might be a goal with listening, but in a different way.

4.2.4 Social conversation

When the goal of reading is to be able to impress others with the amount of book you've read, audiobooks might be even more suitable for this because it is easier to get through a lot of audiobooks (as you can multitask while listening) and get the gist of it, if it's not your aim to have a slow, reflective experience. Therefore this goal can definitely be a listening goal as well.

Overall, it's likely that most goals for reading that are mentioned by readers will also apply to audiobook listening.

5. The audiobook user

This chapter looks at who listens to audiobooks. To determine whether or not audiobooks are taking away time from traditional books, it is useful to look not only at why and when audiobooks are consumed, but also by whom. After analysing survey results a few broad conclusions can be made.

5.1 Readers

Some survey results indicate that audiobook consumers are readers too. Pew Research Center found that 37% of respondents only read print, compared to 28% who say they read books in print and in digital formats (audiobooks and e-books, it's not mentioned how e-books and audiobooks divide), and 7% that only read in digital formats.¹¹⁶ The audiobook users in the Hebban survey more often read a book than listen to one: 37% listens at least once a week to a book, while 78% reads at least once a week.¹¹⁷ This suggests that audiobooks are not taking away time from paper books.

The APA consumer survey in 2006 revealed that audiobook consumers read more printed books than non-audiobook listeners, indicating that audiobook listeners are also book readers. Of the non-audiobook listeners 69.9% said that they had read a book over the last year, compared to 92.3% of audiobook listeners and 94.3% of frequent listeners.¹¹⁸ More than ten years later, in 2018, the number of audiobook consumers that had read a paper book over the last year was still high, but had decreased from 94.3% to 83%,¹¹⁹ showing that audiobook listeners are reading slightly less, but are still readers.

Also, for the last three years, more than half of the respondents of the APA survey have stated that they are 'making "new" time to listen to audiobooks' and that overall they are consuming more books.¹²⁰ According to Richard Lennon, publisher at Penguin Audio, listening to a book is often 'not competing with time spent with books', rather 'it's people who are fitting books and authors into their day in new ways'.¹²¹ He gives the examples of commuting, exercising and cooking. People who listen to audiobooks are readers too, but now they just have more opportunities to consume books.

There is some evidence from a recent Dutch study that might support this, because it shows

¹¹⁶ Perrin, 'One-in-five Americans now listen to audiobooks'.

¹¹⁷ Hebban Crew, 'Infographic: het luisterboek in 2017', n.pag.

¹¹⁸ Audio Publishers Association, 'Consumer Survey', 2006.

<https://www.audiopub.org/uploads/pdf/2006ConsumerSurvey.pdf> (3-12-2020).

¹¹⁹ Audio Publishers Association, 'Consumer Sales Survey Final'.

¹²⁰ Audio Publishers Association, 'Consumer Survey and 2019 Sales Survey Press Release'.

¹²¹ Thorp, 'Audiobooks: The rise and rise of the books you don't read'.

that when people spend less time outside the house, for example commuting, and more time at home, their paper book consumption increases much more than their audiobook consumption. The study about reading behaviour in the Netherlands was carried out during a partial lockdown due to Covid-19 (in April and June 2020)¹²² – when 44% of the people questioned indicated that they had more time to spend – and revealed that people read more, especially paper books, when they have more time on their hands. People who fell into the categories ‘light’ and ‘medium’ readers said they read more than normal, 28% of the medium readers said this and 65% of the light readers,¹²³ indicating that people are still interested in reading, but usually don’t have or make time for it. Reading paper books was in the top 10 activities people did at home, while reading e-books or listening to audiobooks wasn’t. In fact, 39% of the respondents stated that they had read a paper book during the lockdown, while 19% said the same about an e-book and only 6% about an audiobook.¹²⁴ Furthermore, 8% said they spent less time reading paper books, and 29% said they spent more time reading paper books. These percentages were similar with e-books. For audiobooks however, significantly more people spent *less* time listening to audiobooks (15%) while fewer people spent *more* time listening to audiobooks (19%), compared to paper books.¹²⁵ This difference might lie in the fact that audiobooks are often listened to during commuting. As people had fewer places to go to in this period, fewer outside activities, and possibly more opportunities to read a paper book at home, they more often chose a paper book.

In conclusion, it seems that audiobooks are mostly listened to when reading isn’t possible, which indicates that they are not taking away time from reading. However, in Chapter 4 it was shown that people also listen to audiobooks at times when reading a book would also be possible, for example while relaxing before going to sleep. This might suggest that audiobooks in some ways *are* taking away time from paper books.

5.2 A younger demographic

The Dutch study about reading behaviour during the lockdown showed one important exception to the apparent book preference, and that was young people. People under 35 listened to significantly

¹²² CPNB, ‘Resultaten #ikleesthuis’, CPNB. <https://www.cpnb.nl/sites/default/files/cpnb_files/ILT%20-%20totaaloverzicht%202.0.pdf> (22-1-2021); CPNB, ‘Ikleesthuis consumentonderzoek’, CPNB. <https://www.cpnb.nl/sites/default/files/cpnb_files/Toplines%20boekenmarkt%20en%20%23ikleesthuis%20consumentonderzoek%20DEF_0.pdf> (22-1-2021).

¹²³ CPNB, ‘Ikleesthuis consumentonderzoek’, p. 7.

¹²⁴ CPNB, ‘Resultaten #ikleesthuis’, p. 17.

¹²⁵ Nagelhout, ‘Rapportage Boekenbranche Meting 53’, p. 12.

more audiobooks during this period.¹²⁶

According to the annual surveys of the APA, audiobook users are increasingly younger. In 2018 54% of all audiobook listeners were under the age of 45,¹²⁷ which rose to 55% in 2019.¹²⁸ In 2019 51% of frequent listeners were younger than 45¹²⁹ and in 2020 this percentage had grown to 57%.¹³⁰ And in the Netherlands the KVB reported in 2020 that half of audiobook users are under the age of 35.¹³¹ This is the age group that in general reads the least.¹³²

In the UK, males aged 25 to 44 listened to audiobooks the most in 2020.¹³³ This suggests that not all people who make use of audiobooks are also book readers, as men and younger people are the groups that generally read less than women and older people. 'These are not your typical avid readers – but they are typical audiobook listeners',¹³⁴ as stated in the UK report. Audiobook listeners seem to be a somewhat different demographic than book readers. In the next chapter we will look at what implications this might have on audiobooks partly replacing the paper book.

¹²⁶ CPNB, 'Ikleesthuis consumentonderzoek', p. 6.

¹²⁷ Audio Publishers Association, 'Consumer Sales Survey Final'.

¹²⁸ Audio Publishers Association, 'Consumer Survey Press Release'.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Audio Publishers Association, 'Consumer Survey and 2019 Sales Survey Press Release'.

¹³¹ Nagelhout, 'Rapportage Boekenbranche Meting 53', p. 19.

¹³² A. Wennekers, F. Huysmans and J. de Haan, *Lees: Tijd: Lezen in Nederland*. Den Haag: Sociaal En Cultureel Planbureau, 2018.

¹³³ Woodley and Mantell, 'Reading for Pleasure An Evidence Review', p. 21.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

6. The future of reading and listening

In this chapter the main research question is answered: based on current developments, to what extent can we expect the audiobook to replace the paper book? And what will be the consequences of reading less and listening more?

6.1 To what extent is the audiobook replacing the written book?

What happens to reading books if audiobook listening increases? Survey research indicates that people spend time listening to audiobooks when they are not able to read a book, which suggests that audiobooks are just an additional means of enjoying books, and that they are peacefully coexisting with the paper book. In fact, audiobook listening could even stimulate reading. For non-readers audiobooks could be a gateway to book reading, because they can be a (re)introduction to books. Audiobooks also might encourage people to consume books that are 'ahead' of their proficiency or look too daunting to read. They could also spark the interest of young adults that might have lost interest in books during high school, when reading often feels like a chore, and ultimately lead to them picking up a paper book again.

Research does show that audiobooks are attracting a demographic (young people and especially young males) of people who are generally not strong book readers. Additionally, when people indicate they have more time, it is especially the people in the under 35 age group that say they listen more to audiobooks compared to older people. This growth of audiobook use amongst young people could suggest an overall growth of audiobooks use in the future. However, it is more likely that this will be at the expense of paper books, than that it will stimulate reading. As van der Weel says about digital reading: 'Those who learned to read long texts in a disciplined way when they were young make the transition to short screen texts easily. Those who have been conditioned by short screen texts and much distraction will have a hard time turning to long, articulated and more deeply structured texts.'¹³⁵ Something similar can be said about audiobooks. Those who are used to listening might find it harder to read, as this is cognitively more demanding. And if the younger generations don't start reading, but instead always opt for the audiobook, it might be that book reading in the future will in fact decline.

Furthermore, people's reading goals can often be fulfilled by listening, and audiobooks can fulfil other potential goals that reading cannot fulfil, namely being efficient or being entertained while doing 'boring' or everyday tasks. The increase in audiobook use seems to reflect the times we live in. The audiobook's popularity can be seen as a manifestation of today's culture and society,

¹³⁵ Van der Weel, 'Where will the digital turn in reading take us?', p. 235.

where people tend to already have short attention spans and see multitasking as a benefit, whereas consuming a story as a concentrated experience might not be particularly desirable.

Audiobook listening can divert from book reading as a leisure activity or a hobby, and for some people be more a sort of ‘background noise’; as other auditory entertainment can be. In that case, it can be questioned whether the ‘quality time’ that Have and Stougaard Pedersen referred to, really is *quality* time. For some people it might be a way of quickly ‘reading’ a lot of books, without paying attention to detail, just to feel useful and productive. But if this is their goal they are not likely to start reading instead. For these reasons it is probable that reading will decline if listening increases (even more than it already has), and the audiobook will replace the paper book more and more.

6.2 Implications

Even if we stop reading books, we won’t stop reading. We read more than ever – on the internet. ‘Everyone consumes a considerable quantity of web pages, social media, blogs, e-mails, text messages and such on a daily basis. Though there are no reliable figures for reading in this broader sense, it is likely that in sheer numbers of words we read more than ever before’, says Van der Weel.¹³⁶ But this kind of reading is different from the traditional way of reading: it is fragmented and shallow (the opposite of deep reading), so the less we read paper books, the less we engage in deep reading. In Chapter 2 we saw that desirable cognitive effects are less likely to occur with listening than with reading, so these cognitive skills might decrease when people listen more instead of read. Over a period of time, this might lead to a snowball effect: if skills such as concentration and patience are less often exercised by reading, people might increasingly lose the ability to focus on long-form reading. This is something to be aware of, as these cognitive effects are perceived to be positive.

On the other hand, listening to audiobooks can be especially beneficial to wellbeing, because it has the possibility to be more relaxing than reading. It has this in common with other less demanding media entertainment, like watching TV. Leisure reading (and audiobook listening) faces enormous competition from other forms of entertainment. The study done during the Dutch lockdown demonstrates that while reading is in the top 10 activities, it is still below watching TV, surfing the internet and using streaming services. Van der Weel states: ‘For the same needs that were previously satisfied through books, consumers now often seek – and find – less demanding alternatives. Often television series, films, games, You-tube movies and TED talks offer comparable forms of information and relaxation.’¹³⁷ As audiobooks are also less demanding, they could be an

¹³⁶ Van der Weel, ‘Where will the digital turn in reading take us?’, p. 230.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 231.

alternative for these things. According to Richard Lennon, audiobooks might be ‘an alternative to TV for people who are conscious of their screen time.’¹³⁸ Listening to audiobooks does not seem to have the cognitive benefits of reading, but at least it has some benefits that watching TV doesn’t have, like exercising the imagination, and possibly instilling more empathy. But because listening to audiobooks doesn’t have all the benefits of book reading, it remains important that reading is stimulated.

However, even if reading is encouraged, this does not mean that reading and listening habits will change. People’s attention span is decreasing, partly due to the internet, and it might be naïve to think this is reversible, or even stoppable at this point. Despite efforts to make people read books, it might be that some people cannot manage it anymore. Reading requires focus and that needs to be trained, but people tend to do what is easiest, and forcing yourself to focus on one thing becomes harder and harder nowadays. People might start to regard reading, which includes an extra decoding step, as ‘work’, or a duty. If book reading is seen as work, it won’t survive. The publishing industry and the government might try to stimulate reading by stressing the benefits that book reading has opposed to listening, like that it allows for deep reading and therefore has positive cognitive effects. But many people might not be motivated to read just because it is good for them and certainly not if people’s goals for reading are satisfied by listening to the book. So encouraging reading might not work.

To sum up, an increase in listening and a decrease in reading, or in other words, audiobooks partly replacing paper books, is a highly possible scenario. It is also likely that this trend will continue in the future. Consequently, some cognitive benefits might be less, and it is therefore important to be aware of these developments and their implications for society and keep track of them, so that they can be acted upon if this is deemed necessary.

¹³⁸ Thorp, ‘Audiobooks: The rise and rise of the books you don’t read’.

7. Conclusion

In this thesis I compared audiobooks with traditional paper books because more and more people are listening to audiobooks. Data shows that audiobooks are incredibly popular. At the same time, reading is declining. It is worth investigating what implications this increase in listening and decrease in reading has for both individuals and society. The research question was: based on current developments, to what extent can we expect the audiobook to replace the paper book? And what will be the consequences of reading less and listening more? The hypothesis was that the audiobook will replace the written book more and more in the future and that some effects that occur with reading and are considered beneficial for individuals and society may not occur with listening.

Chapter 1 looked at the effects of reading. These were divided into cognitive effects and social-emotional effects.

Research shows that reading has a positive effect on several aspects of cognition, such as comprehension and memory, and tasks requiring concentration (and patience). This can be explained by a number of characteristics of text. Text is read, so it is visual, and visual cues can be used to guide the reader, which can facilitate the reading process. This is an aspect of text that leads to a structured, analytical way of thinking. Furthermore, reading consists of decoding graphic symbols and extracting meaning from them. The decoding element in the process of reading is important in itself; it requires effort, thereby helping readers to develop focus and patience. Another characteristic of text is that it is non-linear; it allows the reader to go back (regression) and read at his own pace. That gives the reader an opportunity for reflection and time to think about the content, which stimulates deep reading.

Reading also has positive effects on empathy and wellbeing. Because reading exposes people to different characters and viewpoints, it stimulates empathy. Research has also found that reading decreases stress, feelings of loneliness and depression, and increases life satisfaction, self-esteem, coping abilities and the feeling of social connection.

In Chapter 2 we looked at the (expected) cognitive effects and social-emotional effects of listening, based on the differences between listening and reading. Because of the characteristics of audio (and partly because the audiobook is a digital product that is consumed on a device which offers many distractions), it is likely that concentrated listening does not occur and that the cognitive effects are less strong when listening to audiobooks compared to reading books.

First of all, with audio there is no reading involved, so there are no visual cues to give structure to the story. It also means there is no decoding step, which makes listening less effortful, which means that it needs less concentration. Lastly, audio is linear and time-forced. The fixed pace of the narrator leaves less room for reflection and also when mind wandering occurs, it is more

difficult to go back to the point where the attention was lost. These characteristics mean that focus, reflection and analytic thinking can be reduced, which was important for deep reading. Additionally, because audio is not visual and you don't need your eyes or hands, multitasking is possible, which is distracting and decreases concentration even more, so that deep listening also does not occur if people use audiobooks this way. Lastly, digital audiobooks are often listened to on a multipurpose device which can also be distracting.

So while both reading a book and listening to a book may be long-form, listening to audiobooks is often not as concentrated an activity as reading, because the characteristics of audiobooks don't stimulate concentrated listening. Deep reading, which often happens in long-form reading, i.e. books, falls away when listening, but deep listening does not replace it. This means that unintentional cognitive effects that have been observed to occur after reading books may not apply to audiobooks. There is indeed some evidence that this is the case.

With social-emotional effects this is different. Precisely because the decoding step is omitted, listening can be experienced as more relaxing and enjoyable, which in turn can have a positive effect on the listener's wellbeing. However, with listening the listener has a little less autonomy, because certain things that need to be interpreted in a book have been filled in by the narrator in an audiobook. Since the reader needs a little less imagination it might be that empathy is less, but the difference is probably marginal.

In Chapter 3, people's reading goals were described. The main goals for reading were divided into four categories: knowledge/keeping abreast/self-development, enjoyment/escape/relaxation, a literary experience, and social conversation.

Chapter 4 looked at motivation for audiobooks. The first part looked at the reasons people give in surveys for choosing audiobooks and when and where they listen, and then how that can be explained by the characteristics of audiobooks. The main finding was that people indicate that an important reason for listening to audiobooks is that they can multitask. This is also reflected in data about when people listen, namely a large percentage listens in the car, and while doing chores around the house. Another reason for listening that was often mentioned is to be able to consume more books, which also has to do with the fact that listening enables people to multitask and therefore have more moments to 'read'. This of course has to do with not having to use one's eyes (and hands) when listening, which is needed when reading. Something else that was mentioned by the respondents but that particularly came up in the data about when and where people listen to audiobooks, was that people find audiobooks relaxing and often listen to them in bed before going to sleep. Of course, that is also a common time for reading, but it is plausible that an audiobook is extra relaxing because of a number of characteristics of audio compared to text, namely that there is no need to see, so the eyes can be closed, and there is no need for reading, so it requires less effort.

The second part of Chapter 4 looked at whether people are likely to have the same goals when they listen to an audiobook as when they read a book. The goals are probably largely the same, but it is plausible, based on the respondents' answers, that goals for listening are more focused on quickly consuming a large number of books (for knowledge/keeping abreast/self-development and social conversation) or background noise or parasocial contact (for entertainment/escape/relaxing), than on having a deep, concentrated and immersive experience as a separate activity.

Chapter 5 zeroed in on the audiobook user. Survey respondents who are audiobook listeners often report that they are readers too, and listen when they can't read, for example while driving. This suggests that in one way audiobooks are not taking away time from reading because people listen to audiobooks when they are not able to read. However, the results also show that audiobooks are particularly popular with young people, especially young men, who traditionally are not big readers. Data from research during a partial lockdown in the Netherlands suggests that while people do read more when they have more time, for young people this is true to a much lesser extent. They more often opted for an audiobook.

In Chapter 6 the main research question was answered. It seems that people use audiobooks as an addition; that they are readers but find audiobooks convenient for times when they cannot read but can listen. However, a large group of listeners are young and are generally not strong readers. Taking into account that listening is cognitively easier than reading, it is not likely that this group will switch to reading books later in life. In addition, people's individual goals seem to be met in many cases by listening to audiobooks and a major motivation for people is multitasking, which can't be done with reading. The increase in audiobook use might reflect an aspect of current cultural values, namely that of efficiency and multitasking, and this might be valued more than having a concentrated experience. So it seems likely that the audiobook will increasingly replace the paper book. A possible major consequence is that cognitive skills decrease, since cognitive effects are less likely to occur with listening than with reading. This is important, as these cognitive effects are perceived to be desirable for society as a whole. It is therefore important to be aware of these developments and monitor them, so that we can react accordingly.

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