



DATI ALLA MANO

I PODCAST

READING, WRITING, LISTENING

Isn't it wonderful to read? Umberto Eco spoke about the difference between those who read and those who don't as the difference between living only one life and living many through books. So, how many people actually read books in Italy?

I am Cristiana Conti and this is Dati alla Mano (Data at Hand), a podcast by Istat, the Italian National Institute of Statistics, where I work in the Directorate for Communication, Information and Services to Citizens and Users. This initiative is part of a public communication project.

In this episode, we will talk about who reads books, what the most popular genres are, but also about those who want to try writing books. And then we will talk about podcasts.

First of all, what does reading mean? We certainly read textbooks during our schooling, we sometimes read technical texts related to our work, and then we read what we like – or what interests us – in our free time. These are certainly different situations; reading – let's say – out of duty or for professional needs is one thing, while reading an essay or a novel for the sheer pleasure of discovery or, as Umberto Eco said, to live countless other lives, is quite another. Then there are comics, manuals, cookbooks...that's reading too. But let's start from the beginning: Istat's first in-depth survey on reading was in 1995 and was called 'Leisure and Culture' and even then, as today, it was part of an integrated system of social surveys – the Multipurpose surveys on families. The name of the survey changed to 'Citizens and Leisure' but the aim – to understand who reads, what they read, and how much they read – has remained the same. Of course, over time, alongside printed books, e-books and audiobooks have also become part of the picture, and, most recently, the survey also includes podcast listeners. So, how many Italians engage with books, in one form or another? I asked Emanuela Bologna, a researcher who has been working on these topics for years.

Cristiana. Hello Emanuela, welcome

Emanuela. Thank you, and greetings to our listeners

C. Let me ask you straight: how many Italians read?

E. 32 million, if we count all forms of reading

C. What do you mean?

E. I mean those who read in their free time, but also those who read exclusively for professional or educational reasons, and even the so-called 'light readers'

C. What do you mean by light readers?

E. They're people who initially state they haven't read books, but then, when asked a more specific question, admit they've read or listened to some type of publication in the past 12 months; perhaps they've read a graphic novel or a gardening manual, or they've listened to an audiobook

C. So we can consider more than half of our fellow citizens to be readers

E. 57.1 per cent to be precise.

C. So a reader, from a statistical point of view, is someone who has read at least one book – including in digital format – or listened to an audiobook in the last 12 months

E. Yes, in the 12 months preceding the interview

C. By the way, how is the interview conducted?

E. We have two methods. Web self-completion – where the household included in the sample receives a letter with credentials to access an online questionnaire – and an interview with an interviewer, for those who prefer not to do it online. However, there are questions that the interviewer does not ask directly, but leaves a paper questionnaire for the household to complete... this is to avoid influencing the respondent, so as not to perhaps induce them to want to 'make a good impression' and declare more than they actually read...

C. I understand, and it seems like a good way to encourage full sincerity. But you mentioned a sample, so the primary survey is sample-based, meaning it involves a proportion of people representative of the entire population, right?

E. Correct

C. And in the last edition, how many people were involved, that is, how many completed the questionnaire?

E. Almost 17000 households, for a total of about 38 000 individuals

C. Well, those are huge numbers!

E. Sure, that's why we can then disaggregate the data at a regional level

C. So tell me, in which region do people read the most?

E. In the autonomous province of Bolzano. There, readers are 69.6 per cent of the population

C. And now I have to ask you which is the region where people read the least

E. Calabria, with 43 per cent of readers...including light readers.

C. But those who don't read, why don't they read?

E. Look, the reason stated most frequently is lack of interest: 35 per cent of non-readers consider reading boring, not engaging. Next, we find the lack of free time as a reason, which is reported by just over one in four non-readers.

C. Which then means that in their free time, however little it may be, they prefer other activities. Listen, I imagine it's pointless to say that educational qualification influences the habit of reading

E. Indeed, in all age groups we find the highest percentage of readers among graduates

C. And the very young? Tell me about the very young

E. Well, the very young between 11 and 14 years old are those who read the most. Readers in that age group are 78.9 per cent

C. The same percentage for males and females?

E. No, reading is more widespread among girls, with a difference of over ten percentage points. But even for boys, that's the age when they read the most.

C. And what do they read?

E. About half of readers aged 11 to 14 - and here we are talking about reading in their free time and not for school obligations - about half, we were saying, read comic books, including manga and graphic novels

C. Does that mean half of those young people only read this type of book?

E. No, not exclusively. We have a similar percentage that reads science fiction or fantasy, another 43% that reads specific literature for young people. This means these are the most popular genres

C. What are, instead, the most popular genres among adults?

E. With some differences across different age groups, I would say that Italian fiction, poetry, and theatre are the main genres. Following that, foreign fiction, poetry, and theatre. Then, however, as I told you, there are differences by age groups and gender differences.

C. Tell us more!

E. For example, thrillers and crime novels are generally more popular among men. Particularly from 65 years old upwards.

C. And women? What do women read?

E. Italian and foreign fiction, more than men.

C. And now a key question: how much do readers read?

E. Well, most read one to three books a year.

C. Both men and women?

E. Yes, this is a common figure for both genders; however, compared to men, the percentage of women who read many books is higher.

C. Basically, there are more heavy readers among women than among men.

E. Exactly.

C. And how much do heavy readers read?

E. Well, just over 10 per cent of readers read between thirteen and thirty books in a year, while 3.2 per cent read more than thirty books. This is the average for men and women, but as we said, the percentage is higher among women than among men.

C. Interesting, I also realise that I fall into that just over 10 per cent. I exceed thirteen but don't reach thirty books. Anyway, I imagine that the habit of reading is acquired from a very young age...

E. Look, regarding this, we have the pre-reading data

C. What does that mean?

E. The data relating to children aged zero to five who, outside of school – in this case, nursery or pre-school – read an illustrated book or other forms of books with an adult, or colour or leaf through a book...in short, children who become familiar with books

C. And what do the data tell us?

E. We have a lot of information. For example, I can tell you that about four out of ten young children 'handle' books every day with their mother

C. Interesting...we hope they continue to read as they grow up. But speaking of which, how do people get books? Do they buy them, or borrow them from the library?

E. It depends on the age groups. In our survey, we asked how the last book read was acquired, and for the youngest people it is common to have borrowed it from the library – probably in the school library – or found it at home, or received it as a gift. In the middle age groups, the most common solution is the purchase from a bookshop or via Internet. While a gifted book is present in all age groups, we find it more often among the very young – as we said – but also among the elderly. And people aged 75 and over quite frequently state that they have read a book found at home...who knows, perhaps it's a re-reading.

C. These are also interesting data. But tell me, how do we rank in Europe regarding reading?

E. We can make the comparison with reference to 2022, thanks to EU-SILC data, which is the European survey on income and living conditions.

C. And what does EU-SILC tell us?

E. It tells us that if we consider the percentage of people aged 16 and over who have read at least one book in the previous year for non-professional or non-school reasons, Italy is in third-to-last position: only ahead of Cyprus and Romania.

C. Does this also apply to young people?

E. In comparison with their European peers, our young people do not fare any better. In the ranking, we are still in the last positions.

C. Do heavy readers at least save us?

E. In fact, when comparing readers of more than ten books a year, we fare better: we are still below the European average, but only slightly: 11.3 against 13.8.

C. Listen, but is it true that in Italy people read little but feel like writers?

E. Well, over 2.7 million people have tried to write a book, and among those who have actually written a book, almost 700 000 have tried to publish it, either through a publisher or various forms of self-publishing.

C. Those are significant numbers too. But now I would like to talk about the format we are in now, a format that, especially since the pandemic, has made its way into the field of information and entertainment: the podcast. How widespread are podcasts in Italy?

E. In 2024, among the overall population aged 11 and over, 17.4 per cent stated that they have the habit of listening to podcasts. So, we are not talking about a mass practice, but a consolidated phenomenon and probably growing.

C. And who listens to them the most? The very young?

E. Podcasts are undoubtedly successful among young people. If we look at the 20-24 age group, almost 4 out of 10 are regular listeners. The proportion of users among 18-19-year olds and 25-34-year olds is also significant. But after the age of 45, listening drops drastically: among those over 65, fewer than 1 in 10 people listen to podcasts. In short, the podcast is undoubtedly the king of the youngest audience.

C. Are there differences in listening between men and women?

E. Men are slightly more regular, but the gender gap narrows among younger generations.

C. And are there territorial differences?

E: Yes, in the North-West and North-East, the listenership is around 20 per cent, with peaks in Lombardia and Trento. The Centre follows closely. In the South and Islands, however, the share drops below 14 per cent, with the Islands in particular recording the lowest figure (12.3 per cent). And then in metropolitan centres the listenership is significantly more widespread compared to small municipalities: it ranges from 23 per cent to 14.2 per cent.

C. So cities are more "podcast friendly". And what about professional status?

E. I can tell you that students lead, with approximately 36 per cent of listeners. Immediately after, we find managers, entrepreneurs, and freelancers, who account for 30 per cent. Among manual workers and apprentices, the share drops to 15 per cent, while homemakers and pensioners remain below 10 per cent. So we can say that those who study or hold qualified positions are more inclined towards this format.

C. Is educational qualification also a distinguishing factor?

E: Yes. At least one third of graduates listen to podcasts. More education means being more familiar and access to this format.

C. So far we have talked about who listens to podcasts, but what do they listen to?

E. The absolutely dominant genre is 'Current Affairs and Politics', followed closely by the great evergreen: 'Entertainment'. This is followed by 'Health and Wellbeing' and 'Investigations, True Crime Reports'.

C. Differences between men and women?

E. Men are more interested in current affairs. But the real difference can be found in sport: it is the preferred genre for almost a third of male listeners, compared to just 5.2 per cent of female listeners. Women focus more on 'Health and Wellbeing' and 'Investigations, True Crime Reports'. For students of both sexes, the favourite genre is entertainment.

C. Thank you very much, Emanuela, for sharing these figures with us. See you next time!

E. Goodbye.

So, we have talked about readers and reading, and we have also seen that in this field, in Europe, we are in last place. But since the youngest people in our country are the ones who read the most, perhaps we can hope for the future. And then, for the first time, we have seen official data on podcast listening, data that directly concerns us.

I am Cristiana Conti and this was Dati alla mano (Data at Hand), a podcast of the Italian National Institute of Statistics.

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Are there any topics you would like to explore further? Write to me at datiallamano@istat.it

Emanuela Bologna, Sara Maulo and Manuela Bartolotta worked on this episode.