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## The Escape from Everyday Life? Accounts of Holidays and Anniversaries in TV news<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Since its beginning, humanity has divided space-time into the realms of *S* *profanum* and *sacrum*, or – in a broader sense – into the realms of the ordinary and extraordinary. Cultural anthropology has found that even very distinct cultures have developed the notions of the sacred and extraordinary and those of the profane and ordinary<sup>2</sup>.

There is an extensive spectrum of extraordinary places and times, including sacred ones. Halina Mielicka classifies holidays according to their form, purpose and function. She identifies simple holidays (ritual, habit) and complex ones (rite, custom, celebration, ceremony) with respect to their form. Regarding their purpose, she identifies individual, social, and religious holidays. Grouping holidays with regard to their function, she observes that they can fulfill different needs. Nevertheless, in her opinion there exist four basic systems of needs: organic, personalist, social and cultural, and four corresponding functions: external, internal, instrumental and consumer; she is in agreement with Talcott Parsons's concept here. Social systems and the holidays celebrated within their frameworks operate so that groups of people can adapt to the changing conditions, attain their objectives, integrate, observe certain models and eliminate internal tensions<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The article is written on the basis of a paper presented on international conference: "News in Europe, Europe on News. The Proximity and Distance", which took place in Poznań in August 28–30, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> M. Eliade, *Sacred Area and The Scacralization of the World; Holy Time and Myths*, in: *Anthropology of Culture. Issues and Selection of Texts*, ed. A. Mencwel, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2005, p. 101–110, 149–157.

<sup>3</sup> H. Mielicka, *Anthropology of Holidays and Celebration*, Wydawnictwo Akademii Świętokrzyskiej, Kielce 2006, p. 47–60; T. Parsons, *Social Structure and Personality*, Collier-Macmillan, New York–London 1965, *passim*.

Additionally, they are connected, forming a complicated system which organizes the mode of existence of a given community. According to Eric Rothenbuhler, 'ritual is a symbolically organized element of nearly every social action'. In his opinion

'organized life requires entrances, passages and departures; therefore we have initiations and greetings, conferring grades and promotions, firings, dismissals, layoffs, retirements, dinners and parties, as well as reunions. In his concept, the elements of the extraordinary permanently permeate the ordinary in order to shape the latter and make it predictable and organized. This approach treats the realm of the extraordinary as the foundation of the whole life of each community. This realm helps one realize what this community values and where it is heading'<sup>4</sup>.

Communities organize their calendars on the basis of holidays or anniversaries, and thus they establish a rhythm of work and play, ranging from the simplest to the most complex activities.

At present, extraordinary events and their systems emerge as the expression of different, frequently incongruent, axiologies. Even today the state and religious associations are the most efficient subjects at creating their holidays and anniversaries. One should also note the vigorous expansion of systems of holidays and anniversaries deprived of any patriotic or religious references that primarily, or exclusively, offer mere entertainment and eliminate suffering. The pursuit of pleasure and escape from troubles are expressed by means of establishing various communities or societies, each celebrating the aspects that 'increase pleasure' in their own manner. Therefore, holidays and anniversaries can generally be divided into state or national events and others specified by legal regulations, as well as religious, and purely utilitarian holidays, such as great sports or cultural events, usually organized by the market or civil society, although the latter is less frequent.

A profoundly complex network of holidays and anniversaries, which are frequently contradictory or at least competitive, exerts a significant impact on the rhythm and direction of the media's activity and their logic. It is the nature of media institutions, in particular TV stations, to be vitally interested in extraordinary events. Various holidays and anniversaries are covered in television news programs with particular eagerness.

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<sup>4</sup> E. Rothenbuhler, *Ritual Communication. From Everyday Conversation to Mediated*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2003, p. 19 and next.

This situation inspires to conduct surveys which could show how and why media e.g. in Poland create news about holidays and anniversaries. The success of the research depends, of course, on methodological choices which should be undertaken in careful procedure including a set of introductory investigations. The aim of this article is to present the sample of such a simple, preliminary investigation.

### Theoretical background

To a certain extent this issue was successfully handled by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz. In their work, *Media events. The live broadcasting of history*, they have identified a separate television genre of 'live' broadcasts of extraordinary events, organized by socially significant subjects and strongly involving large audiences<sup>5</sup>. According to their declaration

'the book is about the festive viewing of television. It is about those historic occasions – mostly occasions of state – that are televised as they take place and transfix a nation or the world'.

D. Dayan and E. Katz called them 'media events' and defined 'by grouping the elements of the definition into broader categories'.

From their point of view, 'the linguistic categories of syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics are useful for this purpose'. So they assumed that

'syntactically, media event may be characterized, first, by our elements of interruption, monopoly, being broadcast live, and being remote. These are components of the *grammar* of broadcasting. The cancellation of regularly scheduled programs and the convergence of channels are the most dramatic kinds of punctuation available to broadcasters. They put a full stop to everything else on the air; they combine the cacophony of many simultaneous channels into one monophonic line. Of course, these elements also carry semantic meaning: they speak of the greatness of the event. And they have a pragmatic aspect as well: the interruption of the sequence of television puts a stop to the normal flow of life'.

One can easily observe that media events are only a narrow portion of the extraordinary events that society lives through and of television broadcasts. Therefore, a different and more universal approach than that of

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<sup>5</sup> D. Dayan, E. Katz, *Media events. The Live Broadcasting of History*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge–London 1992, p. 1 and 10–11.

D. Dayan and E. Katz should be proposed. One should primarily abandon the approach that the broadcasts of holidays and anniversaries are a special television genre. The assumption that it is the researcher's objective to determine the principles that govern this genre should also be discarded<sup>6</sup>.

The news coverage of various holidays and anniversaries can obviously be classified by means of different criteria. Such a classification can be approached as a basis for distinguishing the numerous types of news reports that cover extraordinary events. On the other hand, this may frequently turn out to be a kind of logical game. Its results will frequently reflect neither the journalists' awareness nor significant regularities which journalists fail to notice. The conclusion is that it seems more advantageous to apply the imperfect, old, but popular and relatively realistic typology introduced by Gaye Tuchman. In this concept, the news is principally divided into hard news, spot news, developing news and continuing news. The broadcasts concerning holidays have to be classified as hard news since they are interesting for the recipient, and they focus on events that are socially significant. However, in many cases this classification can be dubious since a number of extraordinary events are fully planned and predictable, attractive not because of their content but due to their symbolic nature.

One should aim to find out instead which holidays and anniversaries are present in television news programs. We should also investigate how and why journalists give accounts of extraordinary events.

### **Holidays in Poland**

National holidays in Poland might be divided into three categories: (1) holidays free of work according to the law (January 1<sup>st</sup> – New Year, 1<sup>st</sup> day of Eastern, 2<sup>nd</sup> day of Eastern, May 1<sup>st</sup> – Public Holiday, 1<sup>st</sup> day of Whitsuntide, May 3<sup>rd</sup> – National Holiday of Third May, Corpus Christi Day, August 15<sup>th</sup> – Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, November 1<sup>st</sup> – All Saints Day, November 11<sup>th</sup> – National Independence Day, December 25<sup>th</sup> – 1st day of Christmas, December 26<sup>th</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> day of Christmas, Sundays); (2) national/public holidays but not free of work according to the law (August 31<sup>st</sup> – Solidarity and Freedom Day, September 1<sup>st</sup> – Anniver-

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<sup>6</sup> G. Tuchman, *Making News. A Study in the Construction of Reality*, Free Press, London 1978, p. 51 and next.

sary of German Military Aggression against Poland and the Beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, other anniversaries); (3) holidays of particular occupations (e.g. policemen, teachers, miners).

Religious holidays in Poland are divided into five categories: (1) Catholic holidays free of work according to 9 paragraph of concordat between Holy See and Poland: (Sundays, January 1<sup>st</sup> – Most Holy Mother of God Celebration (New Year), 2<sup>nd</sup> day of Eastern, Corpus Christi Day, August 15<sup>th</sup> – Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, November 1<sup>st</sup> – All Saints Day, December 25<sup>th</sup> – 1<sup>st</sup> day of Christmas, December 26<sup>th</sup> – 2nd day of Christmas); (2) Catholic holidays free of work but not according to concordat: (1<sup>st</sup> day of Eastern, 1<sup>st</sup> day of Whitsuntide, May 3<sup>rd</sup> – Holiday of the Blessed Virgin Mary Queen of Poland); (3) Catholic holidays not free of work (6<sup>th</sup> January – Feast of Three Kings, other holidays) (4) holidays of other churches and confessional associations free of work and learning for confessors; (5) holidays of other churches and confessional associations not free of work and learning for confessors.

### **The sample of a preliminary study**

An analysis of the material collected in Poland as part of the project “Foreign news on TV” demonstrates that the broadcasts of various holidays and anniversaries comprise a significant proportion of television news programs. The data covered 540 research units collected in 2008 on January 20–26, February 10–16, March 2–8 and March 23–29. They were provided by the two main Polish information programs, namely ‘Wiadomości’ [News] on TVP (public TV) and ‘Fakty’ [Facts] on TVN (commercial TV). Approximately 60 (that is over 10%) out of all units under scrutiny regarded various holidays and anniversaries. There was a significantly larger amount of coverage of extraordinary, highly ritualized events.

The majority of releases covered holidays and anniversaries of national character, or those strongly related to Polish reality. In particular, news items covered following holidays and anniversaries: Grandmother’s Day, the first month of Poland in Schengen Area, Annual Volunteers’ Party, Oscar nomination for a Polish movie (‘Katyń’), preparations for the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the battle over Grunwald, World Cup Ski Jumping in Zakopane, Day of Islam, World Day of the Sick, 4<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Ryszard Kukliński’s death, Euro 2008, Euro 2012, 2008 Olympics, Let-

ters from the period of the Warsaw Uprising, Compensation of injuries for victims of strikes suppression in the December 1970, Evaluation of the current Parliament after one hundred days after the elections, Saint Valentine's Day, World Premiere of the movie 'Katyń' in Berlin, anniversary of the March 1968 events, The Women Day, Easter, International Day of Theatre. The journalists were also commenting: 84<sup>th</sup> anniversary of W. I. Lenin's death, World Economic Forum in Davos, Anniversary of Vladimir Vysocki's birthday, European Motor Show in Brussels, 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence of the Republic of Lithuania, International Motor Show in Geneva, Funeral of the Master – General of the Maltese Order of Knights.

This may result from the fact that there is an abundance of holidays in Poland. Both the Polish state and religious associations, in particular the Catholic Church, which has the largest number of believers, are eager to organize events which refer to the values they hold precious.

The consequence for journalists is that they frequently cover holidays and anniversaries. Additionally, they often report on events rooted in different traditions that occur at approximately, or the same, time and place. These circumstances appear quite advantageous for the Polish media institutions. The numerous holidays and anniversaries turn out to be attractive topics for the media. Many extraordinary events belong to different systems which exert a mutual impact. This impact happens to turn into a collision when those celebrating refer to incongruent or event contradictory value systems. This reveals the conflict of worldviews and ideologies in the Polish society. Consequently, the celebrations in Poland lead to controversies, and sometimes they become an expression of ideological competition.

Television does not refrain from covering celebrations which do not reflect any profound conflicts, but are merely curious, sometimes scandalous or discrediting. Television news programs are somewhat expected to cover national holidays and the main Catholic holidays. These 'official' kinds of news have certain advantages since a celebration of a national or religious holiday is certain to happen. Thus journalists can prepare for the broadcast long before the event happens itself. In this way they get an opportunity to increase the number of releases to broadcast if the amount of current news is insufficient.

When looking at holidays and anniversaries through the logic of the media one should note that August 15<sup>th</sup> brings a particularly interesting coincidence of holidays. The Polish state celebrates Polish Army Day on

August 15<sup>th</sup>. Poles also celebrate the anniversary of the Warsaw Battle of 1920, when they stopped the Red Army advancing to Germany. For the members of the Catholic Church this is the Day of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Finally, it is a folk tradition approved by the Church, to celebrate the Day of the Blessed Mother of the Herbs. In 2009 all above mentioned holidays coincided with an additional uncommon event – a concert by Madonna in Warsaw. The concert stirred protests and quite a loud discussion in the media. There were opinions that the date of the concert was intentionally set for August 15<sup>th</sup> in order to offend Polish Catholics. Madonna was also accused of attempting to liken herself to the Holy Mother. There were also opinions that the singer's agents chose the date for purely marketing reasons. Her managers apparently counted on Madonna's arrival in Poland on August 15<sup>th</sup> to be interpreted in terms of a provocation which would stimulate ticket sales<sup>7</sup>.

The celebration of all four holidays falling on August 15<sup>th</sup>, accompanied by the actual or apparent confrontation of Madonna the singer with the Holy Madonna was reported by both leading Polish news programs, that is the public 'Wiadomości' and commercial 'Fakty'. The broadcasts of 'Wiadomości' and 'Fakty' on that day were used for the purpose of a pilot analysis of the methods and forms applied by Polish reporters to cover holidays or anniversaries. The main focus of the research was to determine whether the journalists would try to increase the attractiveness of their news by means of the following: (a) emphasizing the connections between politicians and the authorities of the Catholic Church; (b) demonstrating the cooperation or competition between the main actors of the ceremonies; (c) propagation of values related to the state or religious holidays.

This short preliminary research demonstrated numerous similarities of the public and commercial coverage of the extraordinary events in August 15<sup>th</sup><sup>8</sup>. In both cases the news about state and Church holidays and anniversaries as well as Madonna's concert occupied over half the program. Both 'Wiadomości' and 'Fakty' separated the accounts of state and religious holidays, and the releases were presented as an information block. The news item on Polish Army Day was combined with the information about the problems of Polish soldiers in Afghanistan. In both 'Wiadomości' and 'Fakty' the news of the state holiday portrayed the President and Prime

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<sup>7</sup> *Madonna in Warsaw* (2009), "Gazeta Wyborcza" 190, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Wiadomości* [News], 15.08.09, main edition; *Fakty* [Facts], 15.08.09, main edition.

Minister of Poland as being the main actors and political rivals at the same time.

It was emphasized that the President spent the holiday in Poland while the Prime Minister was in Afghanistan. In the news blocks concerning the Day of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Day of the Blessed Mother of the Herbs both editorial teams made use of pictures from Jasna Góra, i.e. the main sanctuary of the Virgin Mary in Poland, the statements of pilgrims and the discussion of folk traditions. The main actor in the coverage of the religious holidays was the Primate of Poland. Both stations presented a brief summary of the homily he had preached. The blocks regarding Madonna's concert included the presentation of her stage image and biography, a reference to the protests against the date of her performance, numerous statements by her fans, a few statements by her opponents and a reference to a Polish village whose dwellers had wanted to offer a plot of land to the singer as a gift.

The news presented by 'Wiadomości' and 'Fakty' were significantly more similar to one another than different. The headline of the public news program referred to the state and religious holidays, whereas on public TV it comprised the information about Madonna's concert and a short mention of the national holiday. The first piece of news in 'Wiadomości' referred to the national holiday and was followed by the account of the religious holiday. The block on Madonna's concert came sixth. 'Fakty' started with news on the national holiday, followed by Madonna's concert and the religious holiday. 'Wiadomości' said that the Primate of Poland preached against postmodernism and the "pro-choice" movement in his homily, whereas 'Fakty' claimed that his sermon was against blasphemers. Finally, 'Facts' strongly emphasized the conflict between the advocates and opponents of Madonna's concert and referred the viewers to a special program on that conflict.

The analysis demonstrated that when it came to show the extraordinary events in August 15<sup>th</sup> both news programs abstained from emphasizing the connections between politicians and the authorities of the Catholic Church, irrespective of their public or commercial character. The releases regarding the state holiday were constructed so as to highlight a conflict between the President and the Prime Minister of Poland. The analysis failed to provide the answer to the question whether the editorial staff of 'Wiadomości' and 'Fakty' used the broadcasts concerning August 15<sup>th</sup> to propagate any system of values. It was observed, however, that the coverage offered by both programs was highly similar. One can venture to



assume that, irrespective of their place on the media market, Polish television programs apply a certain 'paradigm' to design news programs on holidays, anniversaries and extraordinary events.

### **Perspectives for further studies**

It should be noted that the journalists of television information programs obviously influence the recipients by means of their releases on holidays and anniversaries. Thus the news produces consequences which can be either intended by the journalist or not. It is possible that it is news concerning the extraordinary that organizes the images of time and space of a significant part of society. One can assume the reports from holidays and anniversaries show what is repeatable, and thus they organize the chaotic flow of pictures and sounds an information program offers. It cannot be excluded that these messages contribute either to the integration of society or to its disintegration.

It has been indicated that holidays and anniversaries are relatively attractive as a subject of the news. However, from the reporter's point of view, the coverage of holidays and anniversaries, whether longer or shorter ones, can also be a certain trouble or challenge. It appears that as a journalist prepares a piece of news on an extraordinary event he tries to reconcile numerous, frequently contradictory, interests. One can assume that so far the journalists themselves have not defined the role the author of an account of holidays and anniversaries should play.

Furthermore, research into this issue should primarily aim at either the confirmation or rejection of the above hypotheses. Next, it should be determined whether journalists cover holidays and anniversaries as attractive topics or rather as traditional events which are not necessarily interesting. Additionally, it needs to be researched whether the news releases regarding holidays are structured so as to surprise the recipient and increase the attractiveness of the report, or whether the journalist sticks to a set pattern and copies standard forms and content. The research should also demonstrate whether news releases on extraordinary events serve the purpose of propagating certain models, ideals, or maybe even worldviews. Finally, it should be established whether the coverage of holidays and anniversaries propagates or promotes a certain system of values, and if so, what system this is. The results of research designed in this way would also become a part of an answer to the question to what extent a television journalism is

involved into political and moral controversies. Such research should simultaneously determine whether television coverage of holidays and anniversaries is an escape from everyday life or rather an everyday look at extraordinary issues.

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### Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest wstępna charakterystyka standardów, przy pomocy których polscy dziennikarze telewizyjni konstruują *newsy* dotyczące różnorodnych uroczystości.

W tekście wykazano, że w realiach polskich święta i rocznice często okazują się atrakcyjnym tematem *newsa*. Niemniej z punktu widzenia reportera ich relacjonowanie bywa też pewnym kłopotem czy wyzwaniem. Przygotowując komunikat dotyczący zdarzenia niecodziennego, dziennikarz stara się godzić wiele sprzecznych nieraz interesów. Można przypuszczać, że dotychczas sami dziennikarze nie zdefiniowali roli, jaką spełniać winien autor relacji dotyczącej świąt i rocznic.

W tekście skupiono się również na funkcjach tego typu przekazów. Możliwe, iż to właśnie *newsy* dotyczące tego, co niecodzienne organizują wizję czasu i przestrzeni wielu Polaków. Być może omawiane relacje, ukazując to, co powtarzalne, porządkują chaotyczny przepływ obrazów i dźwięków, jakim *de facto* jest program informacyjny. Niewykluczone, iż *newsy* dotyczące świętowania oraz upamiętniania przyczyniają się do integracji/dezintegracji polskiego społeczeństwa.