

## DEATH AND DYING IN MASS MEDIA ASPECTS

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### ABSTRACT

We live in times when the mystery of human's death and life becomes a big, almost every day's subject to present means of social communication. The private observation of a media report shows us that this is a matter which is worth describing and discussing as it meets with great resonance on receivers not only due to writing it in periodization human's development as a final stage but also due to prism of the issue's commercialization. Each situation is a good opportunity to make the receiver associated with the subject matter. However, the way of its presentation makes a lot of objections in many scientific environments. The subject to death is given very rarely in mass media deepen by philosophical-religious reflection which is so important to proper human's development. It is rather presented in violence images, murders, catastrophes, wars, conflicts or lately numerous terroristic attacks, which on the one hand arouses fear, on the other hand because of high mass media frequency makes the receiver accustomed to the view of death. And it leads to the receiver's becoming indifferent. The man starts living as if death would be around him and using defense mechanisms tries to protect himself against accepting still painful for him truth about its finiteness and transience. Meanwhile, death is written in human's existence independently of his worldview.

**Key words:** dying, death, mass media, media death images

## *Introduction*

A lot of specialists who deal with dying and death aspect every day are of the opinion that it “breeds mass media – focuses attention, is moved, shocks...”<sup>1</sup> It happens so because people want to know about it, wants to take part in it on many reasons. When we get some information about a tragedy, it really tears us up inside, we feel sorry for victims and their families, we show solidarity with them, organize some help not only materialistic. Wanting to be close, we follow up on the news of many radio and television stations. We are up to date with Internet reports. A media work like this is certainly positive. At that time a global village becomes a community which support each other.

However, each one mass media saying about death is not so positive and does not have so positive influence. Commercialization of many or even majority of every day aspects also reached to dying and death people’s spheres which are a good subject – goods for sale. Fascination of death is ubiquitous in present world. We can notice that not only in traditional mass media but also in new mass media.<sup>2</sup> There are some times when a subject matter is more complex, exposed and so economic used. It is hard to discuss such an all-embracing subject in one article that is why let some chosen aspects lead us to scientific reflection.

### *1. Death and dying in medical drama*

The public television in Poland may be proud of a number of serials, not only medical where a subject to death and dying is highly emphasized in a lot of aspects, among others<sup>3</sup>: cars accidents, cancers, suicides, violence, terroristic attacks, wars etc. Their meaning for a society is in most cases educational, not sensational, which is a great television success. Time and again, we are witnesses of our interlocutors referring to medical solutions from media which are noticed in serials. Many of them, thanks to the educational strength of serials, have the courage to make periodic, preventive examination for their first time. Many of them learn how to deal with the death of somebody loved one, being in mourning, organizing life after death of a partner as the example of their main characters in serials.

<sup>1</sup> [Online:] <http://www.money.pl/gospodarka/wiadomosci/artypul/ciszewski;smierc;w;mediach;-poruszajaca;-informacja;czy;rozrywka,86,0,197206.html> [access: 16.12.2014].

<sup>2</sup> K. Kwasik, J. Jaroszyński, G. Łęcicki (eds.): *Media wobec śmierci*, vol. 1, Warszawa 2012; A. Gralczyk, M. Laskowska, P. Drzewiecki (eds.): *Media wobec śmierci*, vol. 2, Warszawa 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. M. Zawiła: *Śmierć na szklanym ekranie. Obraz śmierci i umierania w polskiej telewizji na przełomie XX i XXI wieku*, [in:] M. Gierusa (ed.): *Środki masowego komunikowania a społeczeństwo*, Katowice 2006, pp. 303-310.

The analysis of medical drama leading by T. Chmielewska-Ignatowicz shows<sup>4</sup>, that the most of this kind of serials watched by people taking into consideration frequency „Dr Faust”, „Na dobre i na złe”, „Ostry dyżur”, „Chirurgzy”, „Siostra Jackie”, „Daleko od noszy”.

These are serials that show our discussing subject not only seriously but also funny and comic. The author of the analysis notices that „respondents are not occasional viewers watching the kind of serial [...], and the main issue of the interest is not only willingness of entertainment but also the medical case and the way of its solution, the way of communication between doctors and their patients, the organization of doctor's work in serials”.<sup>5</sup> The serials are watched by doctors and by other people who have nothing in common with medicine. Each of the two groups focus on other aspects and problems which they are interested in.

To sum up the analysis, T. Chmielewska-Ignatowicz take into consideration the fact, that “the basic source of medical TV series' influence on the viewers are specific stimuli that, because of the subjects they touch (health, Wight for life, hard conversations with a patient, fear of confronting a doctor, fear of death and infirmity) build a receiver engagement in the audience higher that just entertainment, trigger very subjective and intimate memories feelings and experiences, which in turn become the main basis for inferring about the strength of such media broadcasts”.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. *Advertisement*

It has been observed that for a couple of years there is a high questions frequency in advertisements, the questions connected with man's death and dying.<sup>7</sup> There may be even use the definition of obsession with death.<sup>8</sup> Especially around November – the month is special in our culture as it refers to the memory of dead people – there are many provoking adverts using the motives like illnesses, dying and human's death. The adverts especially show widowed people, mostly women who despite the death of husbands don't feel sadness and are not depressed because their husbands bought special insurance, policy and in this way took care

<sup>4</sup> T. Chmielewska-Ignatowicz: Wpływ seriali TV na postrzeganie zagadnienia śmierci, [in:] K. Kwasiak, J. Jaroszyński, G. Łęcicki (eds.): op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 260-278.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, p. 274.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 277.

<sup>7</sup> M. Jarosz: Marketing śmierci, [in:] K. Kwasiak, J. Jaroszyński, G. Łęcicki (eds.): op. cit., t. 1, pp. 330-342; D. Karwowska: Pokażę Ci, jak się (nie) umiera. Śmierć w reklamie komercyjnej, [in:] ibidem, pp. 306-314.

<sup>8</sup> H. Baruk: Obsesja na tle śmierci, [in:] Ch. Chabaniś (ed.): Śmierć, kres czy początek?, Warszawa 1987, pp. 193-202.

of their future, so they may be happy with their life and don't face any financial problems.<sup>9</sup>

The most controversial was and still is the advertisement "Moi Bliscy", which was a big interest – according to media report – to Office for Competition and Consumer Protection. It is about the advertisement of insurance company 4Life Direct. Its slogan "1 zł per day" is empty promise. Even the insurance agents try explain that "if 65 year-old would like to pay 1 zł per day, then in case of his death his family gets 1,000 zł. If he were 10 years older, his heirs would get only 500 zł. The older people cannot buy the insurance for 1 zł. We called the agency and somebody said: It is impossible to take the information heard in advertisement for granted, you need to choose the best option – explains Hubert Szymański, a consultant of 4Life Direct".<sup>10</sup>



Source: <https://www.google.pl/search?q=reklama+ubezpieczenia+na+wypadek+%C5%9Bmierci> [access: 19.01.2015].

What is more, presented dialogues in the advertisements, clearly show the goal of the authors that they wanted to achieve in them, which don't let the receiver to make choice. At the same time there are persuasion and manipulation techniques used in them. These are some examples:

– *I don't want Basia to have some financial problems after my death* – this makes people feel guilty and causes fear after their death as they make troubles

<sup>9</sup> See [online:] <https://www.google.pl/search?q=reklama+ubezpieczenia+na+wypadek+%C5%9Bmierci-&biw=1366-&bih=-623&tbm=isch&imgil=xYvgqDo4zEH> [access: 19.12.2014]; [https://www.4lifedirect.pl/partners/cd686e2e-7e56-474f-93b0e6fd175ebe43?utm\\_source=Google&utm\\_medium=CPC&utm\\_content=U%20Na%20wypadek%20%C5%9Bmierci&utm\\_campaign=4LD%20Ubezpieczenia](https://www.4lifedirect.pl/partners/cd686e2e-7e56-474f-93b0e6fd175ebe43?utm_source=Google&utm_medium=CPC&utm_content=U%20Na%20wypadek%20%C5%9Bmierci&utm_campaign=4LD%20Ubezpieczenia) [access: 19.12.2014].

<sup>10</sup> [Online:] [http://wyborcza.biz/finanse/1,105684,12512980,UOKiK\\_przeswietla\\_reklame\\_polisy\\_Moi\\_Bliscy.-Wprowadza.html](http://wyborcza.biz/finanse/1,105684,12512980,UOKiK_przeswietla_reklame_polisy_Moi_Bliscy.-Wprowadza.html) [access: 20.12.2014].

then. The old people feel a burden for others so they try to make everything to support their family and not to make troubles.

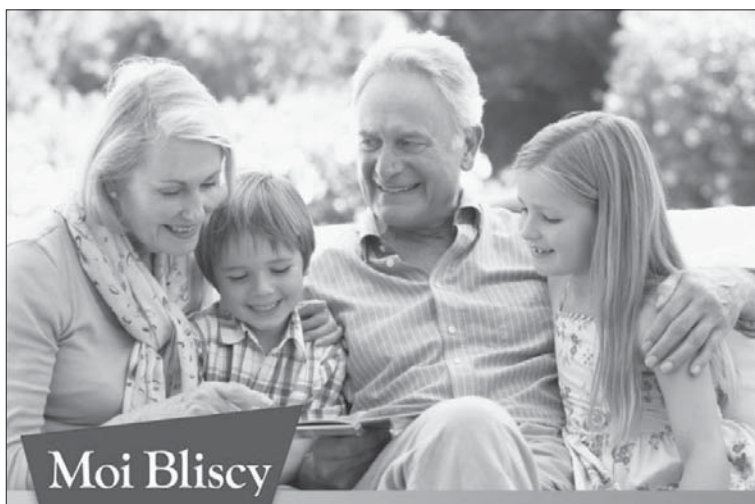
– *The funeral costs 16,000 zł at present. Death grant is only 4,000 zł* – that is an exaggeration, manipulation of information, as the expenses are much lower. The sentence also highlights the missing 12,000 zł and the missing money is for every pensioner a huge amount of money. So the possibility of avoiding such a burden for family is a very good reason to buy a proper policy.

– *Mrs Alina has just taken care of her close family. You can do this too. Only one conversation is enough* – we see here direct question to the receiver and comparison to the person showed in the advertisement. The emphasis: *took care of her close family. You can do this too*, suggests that the receiver do not take care of the closest family enough, which again causes remorse and makes feel guilty.

What is more current stressing the advantages of the policy that:

1. It's for people aged 40-85
2. Premium money is from 1 zł per day
3. No medical examination needed
4. The acceptance is guarantee
5. Premium money won't be higher
6. Health service won't be lower

finished by the sentence: “do not leave your family with the worry”<sup>11</sup>, is a big psychological pressure put on the receiver. The phrase: *Don't leave*, is again direct call to receiver as an aim to make the meaning stronger.



Source: <https://www.google.pl/search?q=reklama+ubezpieczenia+na+wypadek+%C5%9Bmierci> [access: 19.01.2015].

<sup>11</sup> [Online:] <http://wyborcza.biz/finanse/> [access: 15.09.2014].

There are also some pictures, in which the members of family, people in older age think about their close family with concern and love when they have in their minds their passing away. Mostly there are men, who are guided by common sense, sensitive, caring, efficient, inventive. Their behavior should be an example and motivation to take steps for other men.

These adverts are strongly emotional, making the viewers feel guilty that they haven't taken care of their families' future yet. Their aim is also to make a potential receiver of the advertisement transfer have a deep reflection based on making proper decision in the future.

The scientists from the academic world treat the advertisement with a big disapproval as they see in the marketing action a big human objectification, full of manipulation for which insurance agencies are responsible whose aim is financial profit. We need to remember that the old people trust the adverts, believe in what they see in TV and radio. They don't understand that there may be anyone who wants to manipulate them, lie to them and be dishonest towards them. The next aspect are advertisements connected with 1% tax for these organizations which take care of suffering and dying people every day. In the television, radio as well as on the Internet the theme at the time of tax returns is very famous.<sup>12</sup>

Below, there are some examples which refer to feeling, emotions and human's sensitivity. Presenting people, who are usually children, as well as chosen colours, music, texts are unambiguous messages for a receiver. In this case every person may be the receiver who pays taxes, accounts for with tax office and has an opportunity to give 1% of his taxes to one of many public institutions.



<sup>12</sup> [Online:] <https://www.google.pl/search?q=reklama+1+%25+na+hospicjum> [access: 20.12.2014].



In these advertisements commercialization of suffering, dying and death is big. But the most shocking is using children no matter if they are small actors or children who really are in pain. Engaging children always double the reaction of potential receiver, for the reason that children were and still are the most vulnerable individuals. Their presence. Especially when it's appointed by suffering, harm, is touched, worries, encourages to do something, to help sometimes against one's abilities. It needs to be point that even when this help is really needed, using means of manipulation is questionable owing to legitimacy their using. And in these cases the presence of children is an element of manipulation.

### III. KONTEKSTY

#### 3. *Death vs. information services*

An evaluation made 12 years ago in four television stations: the TVP1 news, Panorama TVP2, the Polsat news, Facts TVN showed that counting arithmetic mean of the death theme was 24% of airtime in information programmes. What is more there was no big difference between public television and commercial.<sup>13</sup> We may assume that the data would rather be different today. The percentage would be much higher because it seems that none of the elements exist in which appealing to death would appear. The most discussed type of death was and still is the tragic death which is a reason of the outside causes like murders, assassination, biting to death by dogs, poisoning<sup>14</sup>, and also death of famous people. At that time even all news is dedicated to these people. In the past few months the news showed almost every day the death motive. It is connected with, for example, the presence of political situation all over world. In each part of world there is a conflict, some misunderstandings or some less or more serious catastrophes, accidents or

<sup>13</sup> [Online:] <https://www.google.pl/search?q=reklama+1+%25+na+hospicjum> [access: 10.09.2014].

<sup>14</sup> M. Z a w i ł a : Śmierć na szklanym ekranie..., op. cit., p. 305.

tragedies. In such situations live transmissions are still the most often watched.<sup>15</sup> That is why it isn't surprised to call television "television of reality"<sup>16</sup>, while A. Gębalska called death "television partner"<sup>17</sup> because it has an important place in its life.

### Summary

Because of means of social communication, nowadays death become even more realistic. The distinction between the realistic and the virtual is becoming less clear. It is possible to meet the definition of death as a present celebrity<sup>18</sup>, because its presence is always easily noticed and even exposed. We should always remember that the death exposition is clearly at the request of a receiver who nevertheless is still afraid of it. Only the death *me* and not *you* really helps in understanding of its irreversibility.

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<sup>15</sup> W. G o d z i c : Telewizja i jej gatunki po Wielkim Bracie, Kraków 2004, p. 31.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, p. 37.

<sup>17</sup> A. G ę b a l s k a : Śmierć partnerką telewizji. Obraz śmierci na szklanym ekranie w wybranych przykładach, [in:] K. K w a s i k , J. J a r o s z y Ń s k i , G. Łęcicki (eds.): op. cit., vol. 1, p. 279.

<sup>18</sup> A. K u l e j : Śmierć – współczesny celebryta?, [in:] K. K w a s i k , J. J a r o s z y Ń s k i , G. Łęcicki (eds.): op. cit., vol. 1, p. 358.



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## STRESZCZENIE

### Śmierć i umieranie w aspekcie medialnym

Żyjemy w czasach, w których tajemnica umierania i śmierci człowieka stała się wielkim, niemalże codziennym tematem współczesnych środków społecznej komunikacji. Prywatna obserwacja doniesień medialnych pokazuje nam, że jest to temat, który warto opisywać, omawiać medialnie, gdyż budzi on u odbiorców zainteresowanie nie tylko przez fakt wpisania go w periodyzację rozwoju człowieka jako jego finalnego etapu, ale również przez pryzmat komercjalizacji tegoż zagadnienia. Każda sytuacja jest dobrą okazją, by odbiorca obcował z tą tematyką. Jednak sposób jej prezentacji wciąż budzi wiele zastrzeżeń w środowiskach naukowych. Bardzo rzadko tematykę śmierci w medialnych przekazach poddaje się pogłębionej refleksji filozoficzno-religijnej, tak bardzo potrzebnej do prawidłowego rozwoju człowieka. Raczej prezentuje się ją w obrazach przemocy, morderstw, katastrof, wojen, konfliktów czy też licznych ostatnio ataków terrorystycznych, które z jednej strony budzą niewątpliwie lęk, z drugiej zaś, ze względu na wysoką medialną frekwencyjność, oswiają odbiorcę z widokiem śmierci. To zaś skutkuje jego zobojętnieniem. Człowiek zaczyna więc żyć tak, jakby śmierć była wokół niego, a stosując mechanizmy obronne, chroni się przed przyjęciem ciągle bolesnej dla niego prawdy o jego skończoności i przemijalności. Tymczasem niezależnie od światopoglądu człowieka jest ona wpisana w ludzkie istnienie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** śmierć, umieranie, media, obrazy medialne, informacje, reklama