

20 YEARS OF COMPLAINTS National Broadcasting Council and the Polish audience's feelings

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ABSTRACT

This study presents the reception of several controversial TV programs which in the last 20 years have violated the social norms of acceptability, inciting an immediate feedback from the outraged viewers who have complained about unwanted media content in their letters addressed to the National Broadcasting Council, the regulatory body for all Polish broadcasters since 1993. The method applied in this study is the content analysis of the letters of complaint, as well as the programs the viewers complained about. The emotional response reveals a lot about the audience's feelings towards the content which the viewers have found revolting or offensive.

Keywords: National Broadcasting Council, controversial programmes, ethics, law, audience, broadcasters, viewers

The entertainment or news values of the television programs are sometimes in conflict with the social norms of acceptability. The focus of this study is the reception of controversial TV programs which in the last 20 years have transgressed the laws of propriety, inciting a passionate feedback from the shocked viewers who have complained about the unwanted media content in their letters addressed

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to the National Broadcasting Council (NBC),¹ the regulatory body for all Polish broadcasters since 1993.

In the opening section of this study the author describes the role of the NBC, then portrays Polish TV viewers and explains the methodology applied in this analysis. The core of this study is the content analysis of the letters of complaints, as well as the programs the viewers complained about. The passionate response reveals a lot about the audience's feelings towards the broadcasts' content which the viewers have found revolting, offensive or disturbing. It also shows that the sensitivity of the viewers hasn't changed much in 20 years.

1. The National Broadcasting Council

The National Broadcasting Council came into existence in March 1993. It consists of five members representing different social and political circles. According to the Constitution of the Republic of Poland (1997), the National Broadcasting Council "shall safeguard the freedom of speech, the right to information as well as safeguard public interest regarding radio broadcasting and television" (art. 213). From the very beginning the NBC has dealt solely with radio and television. For more than 20 years it has been regarded as an arbitrator between the broadcasters and the viewers or listeners (see Hodalska 2004).

According to Clement Jones (1979), a media council is "a mediator between various sections of the mass media and the public" (p. 47). Paivi Sonninen and Tiina Laitila (1995) have studied the press councils in Europe. In their report they stated: "By giving the public the opportunity to complain about bad or unethical journalism, the press councils give the public at least some voice in the media performance" (p. 4). The same applies to broadcasting councils and audiovisual regulatory authorities in Western, Central and Eastern Europe (Jakubowicz, Jean-ray *et al.* 1994, p. 24–27). As Paolo Baldi and Uwe Hasebrink (2007, p. 17) noted, media "accountability", "responsibility" and "responsiveness" are concepts that are entering into the political agenda of many European countries.

Every year the National Broadcasting Council in Poland receives a barrage of complaints about TV or radio programs which, according to viewers and listeners, transgress the laws of propriety and break the taboos. The number of letters addressed to the NBC has varied from two to several thousand a year (NBC 1993–2013). The letters are set in thematic order. The complaints about technical disturbances and broadcasting license fell into different categories, as well as the protests concerned with violation of proper journalistic norms and ethical rules (cases like libel and slander, one-sided use of sources, accuracy of information). Each year, the NBC receives several hundred complaints about the content of te-

¹ Polish name for the NBC is Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji (KRRiT).

levision programs and that category of complaints, called “program complaints”, has been the focus of this study.

According to John Ellis (1992, p. 160–162), a man perceives the world through television. It has become a domestic medium (for example Goban-Klas 1999, p. 116), a window which can be shut when the messages coming through it somehow disturb the harmony of the inner world of the viewer. Andrzej Zwoliński (2004) wrote that “homo televisiosus” (p. 280) had produced mechanisms of protection against unwanted information or messages. The protests against revolting media content are an attempt to re-establish the violated rules and to restore the balance lost because of the controversial broadcast. The complainants do not represent the whole society, but only the most involved viewers who are moved, agitated or stirred to that extent that they spend their private time writing emotional condemnation letters.

Letters of complaint addressed to the Polish NBC usually take the form of an intervention or very harsh polemics with the producers of the program. The viewers demand satisfaction and believe that the NBC is able to ensure that. Sometimes they overestimate its authority, forgetting that the Council has in fact no real influence on the content of the programs, which are produced independently by the broadcasters.

However, the NBC can impose financial penalties on public and private broadcasters. Pursuant to the Council’s resolution, the Chairman of the NBC is authorized to require from a broadcaster all materials necessary to assess programs as to their compatibility with the applicable law, order that the broadcasting of programs that violate the law should be discontinued, fine a broadcaster or its owners in the event of any violations of the law (NBC, Council’s...).

The Council is the highest supervisory authority for the new television and radio companies (Jakubowicz, Jeanray *et al.* 1994, p. 24). It has been regarded as the regulatory body and the media council as well. After having received a letter of complaint from a single viewer, the NBC starts an investigation procedure conducted in connection with the program the viewer complained about.

The complaints reveal a lot about the reception of controversial media content and the audience’s feelings which prompt an immediate feedback. The letters form “the third level of the intertextuality of television”, as John Fiske (1987, p. 124) put it in “Television Culture”. According to him, the letters from the viewers “are the ethno-semiological data”: “Studying them can give us insights into how the primary (TV programs) and secondary (criticism or publicity) texts are read and circulated in the culture of the viewers” (p. 124).

2. *Polish TV audience*

20 years ago an average Polish viewer spent almost 3 hours daily watching TV (OBP 1997, p. 6), in 2000 the amount of time increased to 3 hours and 43 minu-

tes (NBC 2011). In 2013 an average viewer in Poland spent about 4 hours and 7 minutes a day in front of the TV set (NBC 2013). Even the use of new technologies, convenient VoD or catch-up TV, hasn't influenced the amount of time people have spent watching TV (Filas 2010, p. 47), although smartphones and tablets have transformed "the traditional living room of our parents and grandparents into a digital media hub" (Ofcom 2013), where "media multi-taskers" seek: entertainment, breaking news, the live broadcasting of historical and sport events and comments and user generated content (Wojdyło 2010).

According to Ofcom's Communications Market Report, people are "streaming videos, firing off instant messages and updating their social media status – all while watching more TV than before" (2013), and still come together to watch TV in the living room – 91% of UK adults view TV on the main set each week. It is the same in Poland (NBC 2013), where mainly women spend most of the time watching television. Those who live in large cities choose commercial broadcasters, and those who live in small towns prefer public TVP. According to the latest research (Dzierżyńska-Mielczarek 2012, p. 36), television and radio remain the most popular electronic media for the elderly viewers and those at risk of digital exclusion, whereas digital natives consider Internet as the main source of news and entertainment.

Audio-visual media consumers at the beginning of the 21st century turn on the telly to find entertainment, basic news and live broadcasts offering a sense of participation in the events, whereas analysis and opinions are the domain of print daily newspapers. Moreover, Polish TV viewers expect to find: good feature films, coverage of important events, live broadcasts of sport events, breaking news and morning press review (Wojdyło 2010). This is the content viewers are looking for.

The material presented in this study shows what happens when the content is "revolting", "repulsive", "disgusting", "sickening", "distasteful", "offensive" – to quote the outraged viewers who have been writing letters to the NBC, complaining about what they had seen on television. Their emotional response and their petitions, pleas and complaints are the focus of this study.

3. Methodology

The author examined 2000 letters. Most of them did not mention any particular program or film, but general tendencies, like excessive violence or erotic content. The author focused only on those letters, which mentioned certain television programs, giving the title or the hour of broadcast. The language of the letters shows how passionately the viewers feel about the media content and how heatedly they react to unwanted words and images.

The method applied in this study is the content analysis of the letters of complaints, as well as the programs the viewers complained about. The content of the programs is presented in the way the viewers perceived and expressed it in their

passionate letters to the NBC. These letters reveal a lot about the Polish TV audience and its feelings towards the content which the viewers have found revolting, offensive or, at least, disturbing.

This article deals only with those programs, which in the opinion of the Polish viewers, have broken the social norms of acceptability, presenting too much sex-related content, excessive violence and death in a way which frightened the viewers or disturbed their peace of mind. The criticized programs represent almost every TV genre.

4.1. Complaints about sex

Watching someone else's sex life and listening about it is still covered by a very strong taboo. Perhaps the viewers feel uncomfortable as unwitting voyeurs, in the role imposed upon them by the form of a program. For some, the broadcasts quoted below were sheer pornography.

“Viagra” in Prime Time (Documentary)

On February 28, 2000 Polish public broadcaster, TVP 1, aired Mark Rubens' famous documentary *The Rise and Rise of Viagra*, which tells the story of men of all ages talking about their problems with potency. It was broadcasted at 8 p.m. prime time and triggered a wave of protests. Viewers said the film “might be discussed on the symposium for sexologists” (Complaints Department [CD]-194/2000²), but should have never been broadcasted on public television. One of the letters is worth quoting – an outraged viewer wrote to the NBC: “Who will erase from my memory those hideous words, phrases and associations?” (CD-200/2000), asked a man who complained that the film “provoked a sick discussion” with his 17-year-old son and he himself had to go to the bathroom after hearing the stories of erection – “It is my moral damage, violation of my dignity, which I suffered without any warning and for which I demand compensation”. The author complained about the language of the documentary and the description of the facts which, according to him, “had more in common with coprophagia than with television”. The complainant was prepared for counter-arguments: “And if someone tells me that I don't need to watch it, I shall argue: Fine! And I'm not watching it! But to see how vulgar and demoralizing this show was I had to force myself to keep watching it for ten minutes, from 20.40 to 20.50. After that I stopped because I felt sick, physically and mentally almost felt debased”. In his letter the viewer claimed that the broadcasting of the document at 8 p.m. was a crime and that he personally suffered “moral damage”. It appears that viewers don't feel comfortable listening to sex-related stories.

² The numbers of the letters addressed to the NBC Complaints Department, retrieved from the National Broadcasting Council Archives.

Let's Talk about Sex (Teenager's Program)

In November 2001, a TVP program for teenagers "Rower Błażeja" ["Blaise's Bike"], was devoted to the problem of nudity and body. The host of the show was wearing an apron with a painted penis on it. "After what I saw today, I'm sure that "Blaise's Bike" is aired only to destroy our values and demoralize our youth and children" (CD-729/2001), one of the viewers wrote, asking: "Do you have no shame at all?! When will we see the naked presenters of the evening News, if that is so normal and cool?"

Noteworthy is that young people enjoyed the program, but their parents worried that such presentations might have "an adverse impact on the physical, psychological or moral development of minors" (CD-729/2001), which was also pointed out by the NBC. Finally, the program was taken off the air, after another wave of protests when two years later, shortly before summer vacation, the whole show was devoted to safe-sex, and presenters were encouraging teenagers to use condoms as well as pills, and the argument about the safety of both of these, especially in homosexual encounters, was something that added insult to injury, in the eyes of the adult viewers and the authors of complaints.

For 20 years juvenile protection has been one of the main concerns in the viewers' complaints about TV programs. The National Broadcasting Council monitors television and radio programs to verify if the broadcasters observe the two major rules of protection of minors: "the protected time and the correct qualification of shows to the particular categories". Regulations protecting minors are provided in Art. 18 of the Act on Radio and Television Broadcasting, while the qualification of shows or other transmissions is provided in NBC Regulations.

During the protected time, that is from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. "it is prohibited to broadcast shows or other transmissions containing scenes or contents which may have an adverse impact on the physical, psychological or moral development of minors. Television broadcasters are obliged to label their shows or other transmissions that are allowed for viewers over 18 years of age" (NBC Juveniles...) with appropriate graphic symbols. At any time, broadcasting of programs "threatening the physical, psychological or moral development of juveniles, including in particular pornographic contents or contents displaying unnecessary violence" shall be prohibited.

Sex in the "Big Brother's" House (Reality Show)

Unnecessary violence and sex were the grounds for a penalty of 300 thousand zlotys, imposed by the NBC on TVN for broadcasting the third edition of a famous "Big-Brother" reality show in 2002. The 2.2 million-viewer audience watched how the two housemates, Agnieszka and Łukasz, made love in a jacuzzi and the voice-over encouraged the viewers to look for the details. Complainers regarded that as pornography presented in the evening and repeated in the morning. The main characters of the sex-scene are to this day associated with the unfortunate show. The "Big-Brother" was not the only reality show allowing

the audience to eliminate the contestants, the second was “The Gladiators”, where “men changed women too often” (CD-15/2001), infuriating the complainers, who wrote letters to the NBC. The broadcaster, TV4 had to pay a 200 thousand zlotys penalty for broadcasting the reality show during the protected time, in June 2001.

Love in a Loo (Talk Show)

Almost 10 years later, the NBC received 807 complaints regarding the content of a famous talk show “Rozmowy w toku” [“Talk in Progress”]. TVN had to pay 300 thousand zlotys penalty for broadcasting the episode entitled: “Love in a Loo” on October 4, 2010, at 4 p.m. The talk show was devoted to random sex and the viewers felt uncomfortable while listening to young women talking about “their sexual life in a toilet”. The NBC (2011) stated that the content of the program “could have a negative impact on the proper physical, mental or moral development of minors” and labelling it as suitable for teenagers over 12 years is a violation of Art. 18 of the Act on Radio and Television Broadcasting.

According to the spokesman of TVN television, the penalty was an act of moral censorship, and the producers were surprised that someone might have found immoral content in the talk show. “There is no such thing as bad timing for a serious and balanced discussion of social issues” (NBC 2011), stated the broadcaster.

“Slightly Erotic Ballad” (Docu-soap)

The same problem was raised by the producers and directors of a docu-series entitled “Ballada o lekkim zabarwieniu erotycznym” [“The Slightly Erotic Ballad”], broadcasted in 2003, on Sunday evenings at 9.30 p.m. Teenage girls shown in their underwear and women who fight in jelly and pasta at the village disco, were the heroines of the documentary which aimed at showing the fate and dreams of poor girls from small villages who desired to be photo models, but ended up as pole dancers. Reporters Irena Morawska and Jerzy Morawski wanted to see what is behind the advertisements: “I’m looking for photo-models...” printed in newspapers. In their documentary they showed humiliating castings and crowds of girls who dreamed of a modelling career. The authors of the series tried to show the hopelessness of these young women’s miserable situation that forces them to bring shame to their families, but many viewers did not read the message and regarded the program as a promotion of such business. The NBC and TVP (public broadcaster) received complaints like: “You show a pimp, who forces girls into prostitution, it is outrageous!” (CD-169/2004), or : “You promote a pervert, that’s disgusting” (CD-170/2004), or: “Why do you show these poor, naive girls, it is so humiliating! Such a program should be broadcasted late at night, or taken off the air!” (CD-172/2004). The producers claimed that they wanted to provoke a discussion on important social issues, serving as a sort of a moral tale, but the footage lacked any commentary of experts and many of the viewers might have felt confused. The NBC (2005) criticized the form of the docu-soap and imposed a penalty of 10 thousand zlotys on Polish Television.

“The Slightly Erotic Ballad”

Showed girls who dreamed to become top models. Almost 10 years later another program, “Top Model” show, outraged the public to the same extent.

“Top Model” (Show)

“You look like a sea horse lying on the beach” was one insult heard by one of the contestants of a “Top Model” show broadcasted in 2012 by TVN. A male jury member touched the breast of a young woman, while others mocked her: “Play with the balloons!” – the other jurors encouraged. “The content of the program is a violation of dignity”, claimed the NBC (2013) and imposed a 200 thousand zlotys penalty on the broadcaster, acknowledging that “touching the intimate body parts of models violates the dignity of women and contributes to the atmosphere of humiliation”. The National Broadcasting Council argued that the “Top Model” show violated the dignity of its participants and might have had a negative impact on the moral development of children.

Erotic Content or Pornography (Films)

In 1998 Canal+ had to pay 30 thousand zlotys for broadcasting “Zazel: The Scent of Love” in prime time. This was the first penalty for broadcasting a pornographic movie, and the second penalty in the history of the NBC. In 2002 Polish Television had to pay 50 thousand zlotys for broadcasting Tinto Brass’s film entitled “Man who looks” at 8 p.m. The film was made from a perspective of a voyeur and for voyeurs, according to one of the viewers who pointed out that “intimate parts of the female body are shown very often, almost obsessively” (CD-4/2002). The images were considered pornographic.

4.2. *Complaints about violence*

Excessive violence in the media was the subject of most of the complaints addressed to the NBC. It remains the focus of numerous studies and research. Noteworthy is the feedback of the viewers who express their infuriation about the unnecessary violent content.

Ocean of Brutality (Action Movies)

One of the viewers complained about the film *Showdown in Little Tokyo* broadcasted at 8 p.m. by Polsat Television, in 1997. The action film directed by Mark Lester was described as “an ocean of brutality: tortures, rapes, cutting off parts of the body, burning alive, crushing – 63 killings and 40 scenes of beating in less than 90 minutes” (CD-055-6/97). The broadcaster tried to convince the NBC that “the Polish audience was familiar with violent films of that kind and the convention of action movies”. It seems that some of the viewers did not understand the convention and were not familiar enough with that amount of brutality. The

penalty of 300 thousand zlotys imposed on Polsat TV was the first penalty in the history of the National Broadcasting Council.

Violence as Entertainment (Talk Show)

Noteworthy is the fact that many complaints about the increasing amount of violence in the media, relate to the programs produced to entertain the audience, while the audience does not necessarily find them entertaining.

The talk show “Normalisi” [“Normals”]

Broadcasted on the public television at 9.45 p.m. was meant to show the life of ordinary people. In 2001 the host invited a soldier from the Flying Squad and asked him to show the audience how to kill a man with his bare hands. The NBC received a complaint from a viewer who claimed that the performance provided instruction on how to kill a person.

Indeed, the well-trained soldier showed the techniques of self-defense. He demonstrated for example how to overpower a man who has a machine gun hung round his neck. The viewer claimed that the clue given here would be very helpful for attacking a postman or an old woman, because “it is so easy to knock somebody down, put your fingers into their eyes, and break their neck. The techniques presented in the talk-show are possible to be put into practice on the street” (CD-712/2001).

The producer stated that the accusations were groundless, and such skills could be obtained only after a long training. In other words: practice is needed, not just watching the TV. The director of the TVP2 did not see anything improper in the night show. She was also convinced that thanks to the performance the viewers could feel safer knowing what a well-trained army they have.

Kuba Wojewódzki, a famous anchor-man of the commercial Polsat TV and TVN has been holding his own shows for the last 15 years. In one of the programs he jokingly demonstrated how to kill with a ballpoint pen, if you have nothing else at hand. He showed where the ballpoint can be stuck: aorta, eye, and neck – the most vulnerable parts of the body.

The viewers argued that such performance could stimulate crimes. “Because of such trash programs kids kill other kids” (CD-86/2004), said one complainant. “It is a scandal!” argued another, asking: “How would you feel if something happens? If somebody uses such a multipurpose ballpoint to kill somebody. How will you feel then?” (CD-96/2004). The third viewer wrote that he was still in shock and so were his children (CD-95/2004).

The producer was surprised at the reaction of the viewers. In his opinion they misunderstood the meaning of the performance. The farcical character of the scene, as well as the canned laughter should hint the public that it was just a game. Nevertheless, the viewers were irritated.

4.3. *Complaints about death*

Death is one of the oldest and the strongest taboos. It is a sensitive issue, especially in today's culture, which has pushed death out of sight (Ariès 1992). The French historian claims that the western civilization has abandoned the public visual iconography of death (p. 32). In other words: "death is publicly absent but privately present" (Mellor 1993, as cited in: Walter, Littlewood, Pickering 1995, p. 579). Media make it public again. Zygmunt Bauman (2000) has stated that nowadays death has been transformed into a "never-ending show" (p. 267). Television has taught us to perceive death in a different way. Georges Balandier (as cited in Bauman, 2000) claimed that death images are so frequent that the media-death has become banal: "The visual ubiquity of death is a kind of exorcism. At the same time death is brought to mind and driven away" (p. 267).

In 1965 Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge proposed a dozen factors which influence the media's selection of the news (for example Phadke 2008, p. 86). According to Jacek Kołodziej (1997), death is "the essence of Galtung's negativism" (p. 48), because (among other factors) it is sure, inevitable and intensive.

Executions and War Coverage (News)

Public executions always fascinated and frightened to the same extent. Jeffrey Goldstein (1998) reports that: "In the nineteenth century, an execution day was a holiday, and schools were let out; it was commonly believed that the sight of punishment would deter future criminals" (p. 27). Today, executions are also made public. The aim of the coverage is no longer "to deter future criminals", but to give evidence of the atrocities and genocide. Films and photos are the best testimony of horror.

The evening news on the commercial TVN is called "Fakty" ["The Facts"]. In the coverage from Iraq broadcasted on December 14, 2003 the producers used archive material as an illustration of the genocide and of Saddam Hussein's regime. The viewers saw a few seconds shot somewhere in a remote village in Iraq. In a dark room there was a firing squad executing the hostages, although the moment of their death was shown indirectly. The shooting was displayed on a TV screen. The close-up on the TV set was a technical trick which brought the viewers back to the sphere of the screen death. The footage presented in the evening news showed dramatic events: captured, recorded and then replayed on the video in a TV studio, as if the TV screen could be a shield providing a shelter for the viewers at the moment when the most hideous things are shown. The image of real death was enclosed in the second (television) image, which might lead to the impression that the dramatic scene is just another feature. The viewers might think that what they saw was just another violence-packed movie, not the real execution of real people. They might even start wondering whether it had ever happened at all.

The television itself is very often accused of a morbid fascination with death, because the frequent images of violence have managed to convince the viewers

that everything they see on the screen is simulated. A real execution was displayed on a screen, showing the TV set was a trick, but the letters of complaint demonstrate that the viewers could not accept it.

The newsreels and documentaries covering disasters, accidents, cataclysms, and war show real death. The scheme of war coverage is based on dispatches reporting clashes or the correspondent's stand-up illustrated by a map of the conflict zone. Sometimes a few shots taken on the front line are brought in. Such a scheme very often causes apathy and lack of concern (Hodalska 2016). That is why the amateur video tapes are so precious for the television channels, which pay willingly for the exclusive recording that breaks the boring convention. The unprofessional photographs taken on the spot seem genuine. They restore the realness of the dramatic events, and thanks to them the viewer becomes the eye-witness of the tragedy. However, the complaints addressed to the NBC show that not everyone feels comfortable with that experience.

"The pictures you will see in a minute are shocking, absolutely shocking", said Tomasz Lis, the anchor of "The Facts", on May 15, 2003. The newscaster warned the viewers that the presented material would be drastic and dreadful to look at. Such a statement has surely drawn the attention of the audience (see Hodalska 2004).

It was more archive material: the appalling acts of barbarism were filmed in Iraq in 1985, during the war between Iraq and Iran. Iraqi soldiers accused of collaboration with Iran were put to death and the camera operator working for Reuters recorded the execution in detail. The first snap takes no more than 27 seconds and shows a man standing in a pit, waiting for his oppressors. In despair, he is asking for mercy, trying to explain something. The viewers see how the explosive is being attached to the victim and how the huge blast tears his body into pieces. The next scene also takes place in the same pit, but the camera close-up concentrates on the facial expression of the soldier.

The material was broadcasted in prime time, which caused an objection from the NBC and a huge disapproval of the audience. One of the viewers wrote that the pictures violated the dignity of the victims, "not to mention the fact that the broadcasting of such cruel material in prime time is a pure marketing operation. The sight of the people exploding and being torn to pieces can influence our perception of the world and, in general, the respect towards others" (CD-396/2003), claimed the author of the complaint.

The producer answered that such a drastic coverage was essential to illustrate the genocide and to show the cruelty of the regime. The editorial changes had been made to avoid excessive violence. "We have decided that Polish viewers have a right to know what has really happened and is still happening in Iraq", said the executive producer of the evening news. Seven months later, on December 14, 2003, the same newscaster put out the material mentioned above, the one which showed the TV set. One of the viewers saw the execution and admitted in a letter

that “although he is an adult” (CD-100/2003) he had to turn his head away during the most gruesome scenes.

The producer responsible for the broadcast assured the NBC that the material had been shortened so that it would not shock too much: “We intended to remind people about the atrocities in Iraq. Showing the drastic details was not our aim” (CD-100/2003), he explained. But we have to bear in mind that this particular footage was taken in 1985, which questions the producer’s line of reasoning that the material showed “what has really happened and is still happening in Iraq”. It is difficult to tell the story of genocide without showing documentary pictures. The reports of horror have to be supported by some ghastly material. However, the viewers complain. They do not want to witness somebody’s agony, being aware that what they are watching is true. The taboo of death reminds us of the dignity of the victims.

Corpses (Documentaries)

According to Philippe Ariès (1992, p. 170), from the 13th century people could not stand the sight of a dead man. They did not want to see the corpse; they covered the faces of the dead. However, the time came when the fascination was stronger than disgust. In the 17th century anatomy lectures resembled a theatre performance. The mortal remains attracted and repelled. The taboo of the corpse is one of the oldest and letters to the NBC show how it works nowadays.

In 2001 the commercial television TVN started a new docu-soap about the emergency services. The camera crew accompanied the firefighters, ambulance crews and police officers and filmed the rescue operations. The program called “Na Ratunek” [Emergency] was based more or less on the convention of ambulance chasing.

Some very controversial material was filmed in the Tatra Mountains in November 2001. One of the mountaineers fell down while penetrating an underground cave. He died on the spot. It took hours to extricate his body from the cave. His friends, the mountain rescuers were accompanied by the TVN cameraman. They knew that the operation was being filmed.

Two weeks later the material was broadcasted on the TVN, but the form it took upset the mountain rescuers so much that they decided to complain to the NBC. The letter was signed by 144 lifesavers who accused the producers of violating professional ethics. They stated:

The material presented had a very sensational character, especially with regard to the choice of the snap-shots. We could see the body lying at the bottom of the cave and then the broadcast was interrupted by the commercials. The advertisements of soaps, napkins, and winter ski-villages [...]. As if it was a feature program! And then, again, we went back to the cave. The producers have assumed that no one would leave the room for another five minutes. The death of our friend was treated in a commercial way, it was meant to be a drastic reality-show (CD-775/2001).

The producer replied that the complaint was groundless because the program had caused no damage to the good name or the image of the dead mountaineer. Nevertheless, the chairman of the NBC admitted that the pictures were gruesome indeed. The reporters should respect the feelings of the rescuers, who were emotionally involved, because the operation and the film concerned their close friend. "It was no dummy, it was a man!" – that exclamation from their compliant describes the nature of the taboo of the corpse. The viewers are upset especially when the pictures serve the commercialization of death.

In September 2002, in the remote Polish village of Potok, two people died of starvation. The reporters of the public Polish television TVP described their fate in the documentary broadcasted on September 5, 2002. The appalling story was put out just a few minutes before the evening bloc of cartoons for children, without any warning. Moreover, the reporter used the photographs taken on the spot by a police officer. The drastic pictures of the malnourished mother and her crippled child were absolutely unnecessary, claimed the NBC. The event was tragic enough; the issue shocking enough, and there was no need to turn the spotlight on such macabre pictures. What is more, the neighbours of the dead and the members of the local community who took part in the broadcast reported the tragedy in detail.

The NBC stated that the sight of the corpse was a torture for the viewers, and the use of police operational material served no other purpose than for pure sensation. Not only was the brutality of the message, but above all, the time of the broadcast questionable. One of the complainants suggested that the broadcast should take place "several light-years later" (CD-654/2002).

The complaints mentioned above concerned the images of the real death of real people. The Iraqi soldiers, a mountaineer, a malnourished mother with a crippled child – dying before the eyes of the viewers. Their death is no longer private, it becomes a public event. "'Human kind', wrote T.S. Eliot, 'cannot bear very much reality'. Yet reality is brought to us in wagon-loads by television and radio every day", claimed Colin Shaw (1999, p. 117). Every evening television brings the image of death to nearly a quarter of mankind (Schmidt and de Graaf 1982, p. 17). The viewers turn their heads away with disgust at the sight of gore. But they keep watching.

Conclusions

Millions of letters addressed to the National Broadcasting Commission in the last 20 years have demonstrated that TV broadcasts often challenge the sensitivity of the viewers, who protest fiercely against programs which violate the social norms of acceptability, presenting too much sex-related content, excessive violence and death in productions representing almost every TV genre. Noteworthy is the fact that many complaints relate to the programs produced to entertain the audien-

ce (talk-shows, reality shows, docu-soaps, shows), while the audience does not necessarily find them entertaining. It seems that, paraphrasing Neil Postman's (1985) classical study, Polish viewers do not want to be "amused to death". "Dying is too serious to joke about it" (CD-95/2004), as one of the viewers put it.

Television has divided death into the real and the fictional, and the viewers know well the rules of the illusory game. Fake blood and artificial corpses are the components of the TV convention and have become a part of the *television ars moriendi*. Death in feature films neither kills, nor injures anybody, but like a telegenic sedative it leads to apathy. The convention of the fictional film sometimes makes it easier to watch violence or death. However, when human sensibility is put to the test by the images of bloodshed and carnage, the conventional character of the message does not matter anymore. Very often the NBC receives the complaints about excessive violence. The viewers oppose watching performances which, in their opinion, provide instruction on how to kill.

The history of culture and civilization is a history of violence. No wonder that the media cover crimes, murders, carnage, terrorist attacks, only that excessive coverage contributes to what George Gerbner *et al.* (1980) called *Mean World Syndrome*. The authors of complaints probably do not know the cultivation theory, but still they fear that their lives are in danger. It's one of the distinct features of the "Culture of Fear". Frank Furedi (2009) noted that in pop-culture and in the media, human beings are "represented as a danger to themselves" (p. xi) and "life is portrayed as increasingly violent" (p. 28). Heavy TV viewers believe that the world is more dangerous than it is (Altheide 2002). As if it was not enough, adding insult to injury, television confronts the images of fake death with the pictures of real suffering. The evening news reminds the viewers of the atrocities of the world. "We live in the reflection of other people's tragedies", stated Collin Shaw (1999, p. 117). The complaints are an appeal to restore the dignity of the dead.

The viewers sometimes disapprove of the drastic coverage of wars and executions. The appalling pictures break the boring convention of war reporting, which after some time could cause viewers' apathy and the lack of concern. The shocking images help them to realize that there is real death and real suffering behind the official numbers and reports on death-tolls. While watching the evening news the viewers become the eye-witnesses of tragedy, whether they want it or not. The letters of complaint prove that not everyone feels comfortable with that experience. If drastic pictures violate the dignity of victims the viewers find them despicable, although broadcasters may argue that ghoulish images are justified in war coverage.

There is no explanation, however, for showing the corpse of a dead man, a malnourished woman and her crippled child. The viewers protest against showing the macabre images of corpses in between the commercials. When ratings take precedence over sensibility, media consumers oppose it, protesting fiercely against the commercialization of death. The letters to the NBC show that in the "ocean of brutality" the viewers are able to distinguish between facts and fiction

and confronted with dreadful images they become painfully aware of witnessing the real death of real people, not just fictional characters.

The dignity of human beings seems to be the focus of most of the complaints, concerning not only broadcasts showing death and violence, but also those related to sex. Given the number of complaints concerning not only images but words used in programs addressed to adults and teenagers, it becomes clear that the viewers do not like to talk about sex, they cannot and do not want to hear about it. Even talking about sex seems to be on the edge of decency, unwanted words fuel the viewer's imagination and feeling of disgust, expressed too often in the complaints to the NBC. The protection of juveniles has remained one of the main concerns of the Polish TV viewers for the last 20 years.

Complaining every now and then, the viewers spend more and more time watching television. One of the complainants wrote in his letter to the NBC: "I couldn't stand the sight, but I kept on watching the film just to assure myself that it is so horrible!" (CD-167/99). Wiesław Godzic (2001, p. 22) claims that controversial programs are despised and loved to the same extent. That is a normal attitude of Polish viewers, or maybe viewers in general.

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STRESZCZENIE

20 lat skarg: KRRiT i uczucia polskich widzów

Już 20 lat istnieje Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji. Przez 20 lat oburzeni widzowie i radiosłuchacze pisali listy ze skargami na kontrowersyjne programy radiowe i telewizyjne, które zdaniem odbiorców były: „wstrętne”, „obrzydliwe”, „koszmarne”, a zdaniem nadawców miały walory edukacyjne, poznawcze, rozrywkowe i w żaden sposób nie miały nikogo obrażać. Takie jest zwykle stanowisko nadawców wezwanych przez KRRiT do wyjaśnienia, dlaczego w czasie chronionym pokazano program, którego emisja, zdaniem widzów, powinna być „przesunięta o kilka lat świetlnych”. O takich właśnie programach, zagrażających „fizycznemu, psychicznemu lub moralnemu rozwojowi niepełnoletnich” (art. 18 ustawy o radiofonii i telewizji) oraz o tym, jak zmieniała się wrażliwość polskich widzów przez ostatnie 20 lat, traktuje artykuł.

Przedmiotem analiz były listy kierowane do KRRiT w latach 1993–2013. Skargi pełne oburzenia i emocji bardzo wiele mówią o tym, jakich treści polscy odbiorcy nie akceptują. Listy kierowane do Krajowej Rady są też doskonałym przykładem sprzężenia zwrotnego oraz miernikiem społecznego i kulturowego oddziaływania mediów. Telewizjowicze traktują Krajową Radę jako arbitra w sporach między nadawcą a odbiorcą „żądającym satysfakcji”, jak to ujął jeden z autorów piszących listy, których tysiące trafiają co roku do Krajowej Rady. Jej historię, organizację oraz sposób funkcjonowania autorka przybliżyła w pierwszej części artykułu, pisząc o zadaniach ustawowych nałożonych na KRRiT, która od 20 lat jest organem państwowym kompetentnym w sprawach radiofonii i telewizji.

Druga część rozprawy poświęcona jest polskiej publiczności i zmianom, jakie w odbiorze mediów przyniosły ostatnie dwie dekady. Metodologia badań, przedstawiona w trzeciej części pracy, poprzedza analizę programów, które, zdaniem odbiorców, naruszyły granice przyzwoitości. Poszczególne studia przypadków uporządkowane są według problematyki najczęściej podnoszonej w listach do KRRiT.

W podrozdziale 4.1 zatytułowanym „Skargi na nadmiar seksu” znajdują się analizy odbioru m.in. dokumentu Marka Rubensa pt. „Wiagra pigułka szczęścia”, reality show „Big Brother”, talk show „Rozmowy w toku” (odcinek „Najlepsza na świecie jest miłość w klozecie”), filmu pt. „Mężczyzna, który patrzy” Tinto Brass, serialu „Ballada o lekkim zabarwieniu erotycznym” czy programu „Top Model”. To przykłady programów, których emisja zakończyła się karą finansową nałożoną przez KRRiT na nadawcę – publicznego i komercyjnego.

Pierwszą karę w historii Krajowej Rady nałożono na telewizję Polsat za emisję filmu pt. „Ostry Poker w Małym Tokio”, uznanego przez widzów za „ocean brutalności”. Autorka przypomina o tym w części 4.2. zatytułowanej „Skargi na nadmiar przemocy”, gdzie wspomina także o reakcjach widzów na programy typu talk show, w których przemoc była elementem rozrywki. Wreszcie, trzecia część analizy poświęcona jest śmierci w programach informacyjnych, relacjach z wojen oraz filmach dokumentalnych.

Niechciane słowa i obrazy przedstawione są tak, jak odebrali i relacjonowali je polscy widzowie. Miliony listów, które w ciągu ostatnich 20 lat trafiły do KRRiT, są świadectwem zmian, jakie przyniosły dwie dekady, a jednocześnie potwierdzeniem tego, co pozostaje niezmiennie, jak przekonanie o tym, że żaden program i gatunek telewizyjny nie usprawiedliwia naruszania norm społecznych i ludzkiej godności.

Słowa kluczowe: KRRiT, kontrowersyjne programy, etyka, prawo, publiczność, nadawcy, odbiorcy