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Media Representation of the Moment of Death: Dying Person's Dignity in the Teaching of the Church and Journalistic Practice. A Case Study

ABSTRACT

The author of the article poses the question repeatedly asked in the world of media, culture and science, concerning the limits of journalistic integrity and informational necessity in the media coverage of human death, especially in relation to how the moment of a tragic death and its immediate consequences are presented. He considers the teachings of the Church and John Paul II on the necessity of respecting human dignity in journalism, with particular focus on the dignity of the dying person, in addition to the respect towards the body of the deceased person. The author analyzes selected media messages with content of interest from the years 2017–2020, and referring to the reactions of some representatives of foreign media, he makes an attempt to construct a list of postulates for increasing the degree of sensitivity in the area of the discussed issues. In the preparation of this article, which is essentially a case study in journalistic ethics, the method of content analysis was used primarily in relation to the examined media presentations and the analytical-synthetic method when it comes to extracting ethical guidelines from the analyzed texts and in constructing the conclusions.

KEYWORDS: journalistic ethics, dignity of a dying person, intimacy of the moment of death, reporting on tragic events, respect for corpses

STRESZCZENIE

Medialny sposób prezentowania momentu śmierci: godność osoby umierającej w nauczaniu Kościoła a praktyka dziennikarska. Studium przypadków

Autor artykułu ponawia zadawane po wielokroć w świecie mediów, kultury i nauki pytanie o granice dziennikarskiej rzetelności oraz konieczności informacyjnej w medialnych przekazach dotyczących ludzkiej śmierci, szczególnie

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w odniesieniu do prezentowania momentu śmierci tragicznej i jej bezpośrednich następstw. Uwzględni nauczanie Kościoła, w tym samego Jana Pawła II, nt. konieczności poszanowania godności człowieka w publikacjach dziennikarskich, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem godności człowieka umierającego oraz szacunku względem ciała osoby zmarłej. Analizie poddaje wybrane przekazy medialne o adekwatnej treści z lat 2017–2020, a odnosząc się do reakcji niektórych przedstawicieli zagranicznych mediów, dokonuje próby skonstruowania listy postulatów dotyczących podwyższenia stopnia wrażliwości w obszarze omawianych zagadnień. W przygotowaniu niniejszego artykułu, stanowiącego zasadniczo studium przypadków z etyki dziennikarskiej, posłużono się przede wszystkim metodą analizy zawartości w stosunku do badanych prezentacji medialnych oraz metodą analityczno-syntetyczną, gdy idzie o wyodrębnianie wskazań etycznych z analizowanych tekstów i przy konstruowaniu wniosków.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: etyka dziennikarska, godność człowieka umierającego, intymność momentu śmierci, relacjonowanie wydarzeń tragicznych, szacunek dla zwłok

Introduction

In the third decade of the 21st century, technological progress has affected journalism so significantly that, in a sense, it has redefined it: the Internet, having become a specific environment for the existence and expansion of the so-called traditional media, is proposing new media formats and genres, creating the possibility of their preparation, publication and reception by an increasingly wider range of users. For this reason, in certain areas of media activity, the boundary between creator and viewer is blurred. This has led to a certain erosion of the rudimentary journalistic professionalism, which results in the devaluation of the practice, and affects the adjustment of content and form of media messages to the standards set out by journalistic ethics.

Modern times are an epoch of global communication, where many elements of human existence takes place through media processes (Depo, 2019, p. 151). In light of this existence, human death is an inherent and undoubtedly unique element. As various media communication options develop and disseminate, the frequency of including content not only informing about human death but also concerning the moment of death itself in the media also increases. However, it must not be forgotten that the experience of one's death is one of the most intimate, unique and most significant events in the perspective of the meaning of human life (Sziling, 2014). Not only direct contact with the moment of human death, but also

the very information about it, each time brings the audience into contact with a mystery that brings them out of indifference. The moment of death is a thoroughly liminal experience: both for the dying person and for his or her loved ones. Regardless of whether the moment of death is expected or unexpected, it is always a poignant experience, since it is the most deeply rooted in the truth of humanity, hence also in the truth of human dignity. For this reason, media coverage of the moment of human death demands not only accuracy of information, but also adherence to the standards of journalistic ethics, on top of respect for the dignity of the dying person and the mystery of their passing. In view of this, the problem of outlining, discussing, and promoting appropriate ethical standards for media coverage of events such as human death appears timely and important.

The purpose of this article is to attempt to identify the principles of journalistic ethics relating to media coverage of human death both from the teaching of John Paul II and from the work of some contemporary media scholars, followed by relating them to selected media coverage of relevant content. In the preparation of this article, which is essentially a case study in journalistic ethics, the method of content analysis was used primarily in relation to the examined media presentations and the analytical-synthetic method when it comes to extracting ethical guidelines from the analyzed texts and in constructing the conclusions. The outline of the research problem area can be determined based on the following questions: What is the relationship between the media's informational integrity and their level of concern for journalistic ethical standards? What principles of journalistic ethics applying to the respect for the dignity of the person dying and the intimacy of the moment of his or her death in media coverage can be derived from the teachings of the Church, John Paul II, and contemporary scholars dealing with media ethics? How do these principles relate to contemporary media practices? What challenges do contemporary media face in this context?

The article is divided into two main parts. The following six issues fall into the first part. First, the informational role of the media and the consequent need for concern about journalistic integrity is mentioned. Then, in relation to integrity, we shall refer to the manner of communicating content, in the context of which we shall put the concern for respecting human dignity. Further, the text alludes to the resulting need to be concerned about respecting the dignity of the deceased. Then, we shall touch on the media's accessibility to content related to human death and conclude the first section with an analysis of the media interest in tragic death. The second part of the article is a case study citing the reactions of some media representatives to selected broadcasts containing recordings of the moment of human death and quoting the postulates of a contemporary

German media expert. The second part concludes with a reference to the condition of the audience of contemporary media messages. This is followed by a conclusion and some final words.

The informational role of the media

“Full, reliable information for the public is as important as oxygen for a person to live” (Czabański, 2020), Krzysztof Czabański commented on Polish Radio’s initiative to broadcast special news casts on the situation in Belarus after the presidential elections there in August 2020. In a similar way, the Church draws attention to the important role of reliable public information. As early as 1963, the *Inter mirifica* conciliar decree clearly formulated the Church’s position on the so-called right to information: “in society men have a right to information, ... about matters concerning individuals or the community” (*Inter mirifica*, 1963, 5). Then, in 1971, one of the Council’s pastoral instructions, referring to the informational mission of the media, uses the category of duty: “Modern man cannot do without information that is full, consistent, accurate and true” (*Communio et progressio*, 1971, 2.34). The Catechism of the Catholic Church promulgated at the initiative and under the pontificate of John Paul II states: “Society has a right to information based on truth, freedom, justice, and solidarity” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1992, 2494). John Paul II himself said to the faithful gathered at Peter’s Square in Rome in 1996:

One can see how far-reaching were the recommendations of the *Inter mirifica* decree, especially regarding the right to information. The Council recalls that the proper application of this right demands that, as to its object, information should always be true and complete (as quoted in Lewek, 2008, p. 44).

The conciliar directives cited above are both foundations on which John Paul II built his teaching and a source of inspiration that he developed throughout his pontificate. The human right to be faithfully and fairly informed by the media was emphasized by him more than once. But can the journalistic integrity postulated by the Church and John Paul II himself be limited only to the faithful and complete transmission of all kinds of information related to a given event to the recipients? Bearing in mind that by discussing the notion of information we touch upon an interdisciplinary and ambiguous issue, for the purposes of further reflection we shall adopt a definition by T. Goban-Klas: “Information is the content of communication” (Goban-Klas, 2005, p. 25). Therefore, it should be understood

that within the media message information is not only a factual description of events or a set of personal, historical and geographical data, but also the very manner of presenting the communication and the audiovisual content of the reporting that goes beyond the verbal sphere. In view of the above, it is easy to agree with a media scholar's statement: "Information is not an easy good to manage, as it breaks all the laws of economics" (Przybysz, 2011, p. 37) and: "Information by its very nature demands that it be managed as an asset ... to be consciously and prudently disposed of" (Przybysz, 2011, p. 37).

Journalistic integrity and how content is communicated

The above-quoted postulate of "conscious and prudent disposal of information" is part of the truth about its influence beyond the realm of knowledge alone. Already in the 1950s, the Church stated in this regard: "News of any event, even if it tells nothing but the bare facts, has a unique aspect which somehow concerns morality" (Pius XII, 1957, 48) and "for all news evokes a judgment of the intellect and influences the will" (Pius XII, 1953). "The description of reality – both the good and the bad – is meant to serve the formation and inner development of the mature man" (Depo, 2019, p. 289), believes Archbishop Wacław Depo, who is responsible for the Council for Social Media at the Polish Bishops' Conference. Mentioning the Polish Pope's teaching, however, he states in another interview:

Our great compatriot, St. John Paul II, once said to Italian journalists that information is not an end in itself and that it should serve the good of man, and build, not destroy. Besides, the call for the media not only to inform, but also to form or shape [people] is also contained in the Vatican's 1992 instruction on social communication. These are ... important directions. All the more important that today's media want to only provide information (Podlewski, 2020, p. 312).

Considered one of the students and heirs to the intellectual legacy of John Paul II in the field of journalistic ethics, Fr. A. Lewek writes:

Information is not a commodity for sale, it is not a message to satisfy human curiosity, but a value to enrich the recipients, to make them morally better and wiser in life (Lewek, 2010, pp. 18–19).

This paper can be summed up by a kind of media studies enunciation taken from the conciliar document, which Karol Cardinal Wojtyła worked on and later referred to when he was the Pope.

The moral worth and validity of any communication does not lie solely in its theme or intellectual content. The way in which it is presented, the way in which it is spoken and treated and even the audience for which it is designed – all these factors must be taken into account (*Communio et progressio*, 1971, nr 17).

As we can see, the concern for journalistic integrity is not only about the objectivity and completeness of information understood as a verbal message, but it also revolves around the issue of how to present content in an ethical way that promotes human development and is based on moral foundations. The verbal and audiovisual media messages concerning moments of human death which we shall analyze in the following part of the article, are subject to the concern for information accuracy postulated by John Paul II and to the above-mentioned “difficulty of management” resulting from the necessity of adapting non-verbal information to the principles of journalistic integrity as well, which is an important element of media content regarding moments of human death. What is the place of human dignity in the principles guiding journalistic integrity (concerning the content on top of the manner in which it is communicated)? I will try to answer this question in the next part of the article.

Content delivery and respect for human dignity

Journalists have the right, indeed the duty, to report truthfully and objectively” (Drożdż, 2018, p. 25), writes a contemporary Polish media scholar. At the same time, following the Second Vatican Council, it should be added: “Truth, however, is to be sought after in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature” (*Dignitatis humanae*, 1965, 3). John Paul II reminded us of this more than once, even less than three weeks before his own death: “In our era of global broadcasting, the role of the media is very important. Also great is the responsibility of all who work in this field. They should always provide accurate information, with respect for the dignity of the person and with concern for the common good” (*L'Osservatore Romano*, 2005, Polish edition, 4, p. 32).

As we can see, information in the teaching of John Paul II – even if due to the nature of a given message – had to become precise (“accurate information”) – should always go hand in hand with respect for the dignity of the human person. But what if the message is about a human person in the liminal experience of their existence that we are analyzing, which is death?

Respect for the dignity of the dying person

It is difficult not to include the truth about the dignity of the dying person in the truth about the dignity of a dying person. “The dignity of a dying man stems from the fact that he is a created being and from his personal vocation to eternal life” (John Paul II, 1999, iss. 4), said John Paul II, whose passing before the eyes of the world seemed to remind us of this truth. Referring both to John Paul II’s teaching on the dignity of the dying and to his own experience of disease at the end of life, Małgorzata Hodalska states:

The Pope restored the meaning of dying as people knew it in the most ancient cultures, when a community was moved by and mourned the death of its members (Hodalska, 2010, p. 121).

In his teaching, John Paul II points out the need to respect the dignity of the human person regardless of the where in life they are and whether or not that moment becomes part of the media coverage. Respect for human dignity is not conditioned by its media attraction.

As far as the dignity of the dying person is concerned, the broad spectrum of its associations should include not only death itself, but also the circumstances of somebody’s passing away, whether the death was anticipated or not, the context of third party involvement, respect for the body of the deceased, the utmost discretion that respects the sensitivity of the bereaved loved ones, and finally honoring what can be called the intimacy of the moment of death and its personal nature. Respect for the intimacy of the moment of death involves three kinds of esteem for human dignity: concern for and sensitivity to the dignity of the very moment of death for the person who is dying; the respect for the dignity of the bereaved relatives; and, when the moment of death becomes part of the media message, it must involve respect for the dignity and sensitivity of the audience.

Respecting the dignity of the deceased: a consequence of applying journalistic ethics or lack of access to relevant content?

In early 2005, there was a kind of media reverence for the death of John Paul II.

In the days of John Paul II’s passing, the media “spoke” in media language about death as a transition, from the perspective of hope and Christian eschatology. All this showed that the media conceal, in themselves,

in their structures and capabilities, a great potential for good ..., (Drożdż, 2011, p. 156).

Indeed, although the passing of the head of the Church and ultimately the death of the Pope was newsworthy to the highest degree, it did not strip the media coverage of a certain amount of discretion and respect for John Paul II's dignity as a human being. In the event of the Pope's death, the media acted as a unobtrusive companion and witness to a mystery, rather than as a tabloidized sensation-seeker.

However, the problem of information availability cannot be overlooked in this regard. This is because the media did not have direct access to the place where the event came to pass, and the coverage was, in a way, secondary to the verbal and nonverbal content that created the moment of this death. Therefore, it can be assumed that this media sensitivity to the majesty of death observed in the first half of 2005 may have resulted both from the lack of access to recordings from the moment of the Pope's death and from the unique role (social, ecclesiastical, national and global) of John Paul II, and not directly from the desire to respect the principles of journalistic ethics based on the truth about the need to treat a human person, including a dying one, with dignity. In recent years, we have been shown that the nature of the "restoration of the meaning of dying" as mentioned by M. Hodalska could unfortunately prove to be only temporary for the media. It seems that this increased sensitivity of the media towards the majesty of death, which persisted for some time after the passing of John Paul II, did not manage to overcome the curiosity present in the audience (and often intentionally aroused by the media according to the agenda-setting theory), directed towards that which is mysterious, liminal and shocking. Although Katarzyna Jarkiewicz notes that the death of John Paul II "... changed the vectors of media interest" (Jarkiewicz, 2015, p. 168), a permanent change in their mentality or habits cannot be observed, which is proved, among others, by selected media messages from the last three years, which we will briefly discuss in the second part of the article.

The media attention to tragic death

Writing about human death, John Paul II lists the following: "... man's life comes to an end, emotional, generational, and social ties that are part of the very essence of personality are severed" (John Paul II, 1999, iss. 3). All of these existential positions mentioned by the Pope deal with the moment of death itself, whether or not a person's death occurs in tragic circumstances; whether or not its moment becomes the content of media

coverage; and regardless of the age of the person dying. It can be seen that concern about respecting the dignity of a dying person is more explicit in the messages concerning the passing away of the elderly, the sick, or generally speaking, those whose moment of death is not particularly tragic. This is because the unexpected and the tragic usually tend to arouse more attention and it is able to focus the attention of a wide audience in a short period of time. The moment of death, even if it becomes news or part of any media coverage, is not deprived of the aforementioned metaphysical aspects. Hence, when dealing with the media presentation of human dying, these aspects cannot be omitted, and the mystery of death cannot be reduced to the role of news only – even if the death is tragic and its moment is recorded (which places the event very high on the scale of news values). In view of this, the tragic nature of death alone cannot become a factor justifying stripping it of its proper majesty in media coverage.

It is obvious and requires no justification to state that the dignity of the human person can be violated, for example, by exceeding the limits of discretion in the presentation of related media coverage. An analogous perspective can be adopted towards respecting the dignity of the dying person, and ultimately the issue of respecting the dignity of the person's body. Józef Bremer states: "A Christian should never condone disrespect for human remains" (Bremer, 2012, p. 22). In light of uncensored view of people's corpses – even more so if they died tragically (as we shall discuss in the section on analyzing specific media coverage) – such disrespect is not difficult to avoid. And although "we speak of the posthumous rights of the person ... only in an analogical sense" (Bremer, 2012, p. 21), it seems that publishing graphic photographs and recordings related to human death and the human body not only violates the audience's or loved ones' right to their respect and dignity, but also of the deceased themselves.

Case study

This part of the article is devoted to the analysis of specific cases of media presentations of the moments of human death. We shall begin by mentioning a case study from the Polish media in the early 2000s. The starting point is the case of media coverage of the death of a Polish war correspondent in Iraq, less than a year before the death of John Paul II. When Waldemar Milewicz was killed in a terrorist attack in Latifiya on May 7, 2004, the public debate was visibly stirred by the fact that a picture of the journalist's body was put on the cover of a popular tabloid. The photograph that filled virtually the entire front page of the journal exuded sensation and tragedy at the same time. The journalist's death

... was a huge shock to the public. Suddenly, the man we would admire for years seeing him on our television screens died. Unfortunately, we experienced no less a shock when the cover of *Super Express* featured a photo of the dead reporter (Strączek, 2017), a blogger recalls.

Practically at once, representatives of the Polish journalistic world expressed their indignation at the practice applied by the magazine. Open letters to the editor of the daily, signed with several dozen signatures, were published:

We believe that it is ... unworthy of our profession for any media to exploit human tragedy for marketing, promotional or political purposes (Żurawski, 2015, p. 120);

None of us wants our or our colleagues' posthumous photos to be used by someone to increase magazine circulation (Żurawski, 2015, p. 120);

We are shocked by your inclusion a photo of a journalist murdered in Iraq in today's issue of *Super Express* In our opinion, it is a sign of sheer cynicism to use the death of a fellow journalist to gain popularity (Żurawski, 2015, p. 121).

As the twenty years' anniversary of that event approaches, it is worth considering whether similar practices of using not only photographs, but also recordings of both the post-mortem situation and the moment of death itself by various types of contemporary media, similar reactions are likely to take place.

In the selected period from October 2017 to the end of August 2020, television viewers and web users were confronted with various (Polish and foreign) media representations related to tragic human death: whether its very moment of death, the stage preceding it, or finally, its immediate aftermath. Eight such broadcasts are analyzed in this context:

1. Death of six pedestrians at a crossing in the Ukrainian city of Khar-kiv on 19 October 2017, hit by Olena Zaitseva.
2. Death of a female driving student at a railroad crossing in the municipality of Szaflary on 23 August 2018.
3. Death of a doctor and paramedic in an ambulance at a railroad crossing in Puszczykowo on 3 April 2019.
4. Murder of mayor of Gdansk, Paweł Adamowicz, on 14 January 2019.
5. Death of 51 victims of mosque attacks in New Zealand's Christchurch on 15 March 2019.
6. Death of protester Alexander Taraikovsky during post-election protests in the Belarusian city of Minsk on 10 August 2020.

7. Death of Manoel Moises Cavalcante at a supermarket in Recife, Brazil, on 14 August 2020.
8. Death of two rioters shot by 17-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse in the U.S. city of Kenosha on 26 August 2020.

The examples listed above were more than cases of sudden human death and the indisputable tragedy associated with it. All but one (no. 7) are also related to the publication of video footage showing either the moment of death or the moment of the attack preceding the death, or both.

It is worth considering the following question: did the selected official news channel broadcasts related to the above tragedies violate the above-mentioned dignity of the dying and the audience sensitivity, and did they implement the necessity of respect for human dignity in the broadcasting of information as postulated by John Paul II? Content analysis of the aforementioned media representations allows us to calculate that:

1. Ukrainian television footage from Kharkiv city surveillance cameras showed pedestrians being run over by a car and their bodies lying on the street and sidewalk (no. 1).
2. Video recordings from Polish railroad crossings published both online and by public and private television stations were uncensored and uninterrupted at the time showing the crash (no. 2 and no. 3).
3. The same was true of the moment of the assassination of Pawel Adamowicz and its aftermath (no. 4).
4. As for the footage of the Belarusian and American protest, news reports of both show the moments when shots were fired, the falls and deaths; the video clips are available not only on private social profiles but also on official online news channels; nowhere is there a pause or any blurring out (no. 6 and no. 8).
5. The event in the city of Recife concerns a situation in which an employee of a store died at work and the staff surrounded his body with cardboard boxes and umbrellas without stopping the operation of the supermarket; this allowed people using the store to photograph the body treated in this way and publish the photographs in the media (no. 7).
6. In the case of the footage of the attack on the New Zealand mosques – despite the fact that it was broadcast by the shooter himself, it eventually became part of the news coverage in the television and online editions of at least several daily newspapers, with some publications made available online on official channels without being censored.

Reactions of some media representatives to selected newscasts showing recordings of human death

In the context of the comments made above regarding the examples in question, one must ask: Is this present practice of informing about human death in this way becoming an abuse? Are the postulates about respecting the dignity of the deceased raised and argued in the teaching of John Paul II taken into account today in the process of informing public opinion about human tragedies?

In an attempt to answer these questions, the reaction of some media representatives to the fact that clips from the video broadcast by the Christchurch shooter were posted by the main website of the German daily *Das Bild* and the criticism of its chief editor, Julian Reichelt, may be helpful (in this paper we shall focus only on the reactions triggered by the video clips from New Zealand, because in their essence they touch upon the core of media-ethical conditions concerning not only the journalistic practices regarding the Christchurch case, but the media conduct in presenting the moments of human death as such. Thus, they become relevant to all the examples cited):

1. In a commentary, Germany's *Der Spiegel* warned against becoming "accomplices in a war" in which "images have become more important than victims" (Tusch, 2019).
2. The German daily *Hamburger Morgenpost*, in protest against *Das Bild's* publication of uncensored excerpts of footage of the attack on its official news channel, completely abandoned the inclusion of images of violence and death in print editions of the daily (Tusch, 2019).
3. Gábor Halász, a journalist for Germany's *ARD* (one of Europe's largest public broadcasters), wrote: "Videos like this intensify terrorism a million times over. *Bild* knows this and nevertheless shows it" (Halász, 2019).
4. An editor of the German news outlet *Focus*, Dirk Adam, made the following comment about the situation: "By publishing a video like this, you create the kind of audience in the media that the killer wanted. This is utterly irresponsible" (Adam, 2019).
5. In April 2019, Marcus Pindur provided commentary on which we shall focus more extensively below speaking for the German public radio station *DLF's* program one.

Marcus Pindur's postulates

In an interview with Isabelle Klein aired as part of the *Medias res* program on 30 April 2019 on the DLF radio station, Marcus Pindur (head of the station's policy and security department), in relation to the aforementioned fact of the publication of uncensored footage of the Christchurch shooter, gave an extensive media studies commentary on not only the case of the New Zealand attack itself, but also on journalistic ethics and the way in which audiovisual content related to human death is presented. The media scholar made the following claims and conclusions (Pindur, 2019):

1. Publishing uncensored recordings showing the tragic moment of human death always crosses the boundaries of the journalistic profession.
2. There is no justification for creating access for viewers to uncensored graphic footage, photos and descriptions.
3. There is a need for an increased sensitivity regarding the mystery of human death included in the content of media coverage.
4. Consideration is needed for the media companies with regard to incidental video recordings of persons dying, and ones made by terrorists and other attackers.
5. The media's task is contextualization, not voyeurism.
6. The media are meant to inform, not arouse or satisfy curiosity.

Marcus Pindur's analysis appears to be necessary and reliable, and above all, in the spirit of papal teaching.

Audience conditioning and decision criteria for media coverage of human death

While the reactions of media people and M. Pindur are rather unambiguous, and the attitude of the audience towards posting similar content in the media varies. It is difficult to say unequivocally whether audiences have become accustomed to similar images in media coverage over the past decade. The information about a death, as mentioned in the introduction of this article, always puts us in touch with a certain mystery that pulls us out of indifference. This is why it would be difficult to become fully "used to" it.

It is, of course, impossible to completely protect the modern media viewer, let alone the web user, from being exposed to graphic descriptions, photos, and recordings. However, it is different in the case of an independent, conscious and active search for such content by an individual, which

seems to be related more to the internal disposition and mental condition of the recipient, than in the case of proposing or even suggesting such messages by media creators, which is not so much about the attitude of the viewer, but rather about the goals (and often also the interests) of those who make decisions in specific media.

It can be noted that regardless of the degree of audience desensitization to media presentations of human death, the media seem to be increasingly overstepping the boundaries of journalistic integrity, making human tragedy an object of sensationalism rather than information. The audience's attitude to such messages, even if it may amount to passive tolerance or even active acceptance, should be neither the first nor the only point of reference for decision-makers who permit the publication of photographs or films showing human beings at their most pivotal moment, i.e. their death (or their bodies at the moment immediately following it). Of course, public opinion carries the potential of setting certain criteria or even rules in the media space, but it should not be forgotten that apart from it, the highest instance in questions of the limits of journalistic honesty are the rules unencumbered by variability resulting from respect for human beings and their dignity, not to mention statutory and legal-criminal regulations, about which Jacek Żurawski speaks extensively in his paper (Żurawski, 2015, pp. 124–128).

The attitude of the media towards pictures and recordings of human death or depicting dead bodies is not related to the attitude of the audience in a one-sided way, because with their publications the media not only respond to the expectations of the audience but also shape them themselves (cf. Carr, 2010).

Conclusion

Referring to the cited examples of media representation of human death in the light of the teaching of the Church and John Paul II himself, and bearing in mind the postulates of Marcus Pindur, it can be said that in contemporary media representations of human death, sensationalism often surpasses the criterion of informativeness. Reporting a tragic death in order to “break taboos” or “as a warning” does not necessarily entail releasing of photographs or video recordings similar to those used in the examples mentioned above, as we all have often seen. The way in which human deaths are presented in the analyzed examples bears the mark of insufficient journalistic professionalism (e.g. lack of blurring out) caused either by oversight or abuse resulting from a failure to adhere to the standards of journalistic ethics. John Paul II's call for taking into account not

only human dignity (including that of the dying) in the media information process, but also the previously mentioned postulates about shaping one's interior life and working for the common good, seems right and still relevant. Creating unlimited access for the public to recordings and photographs related to human death goes beyond the so-called common good and the right to information in its purposefulness, and defining the purpose of such publications as the desire to convey a message "as a warning" seems abusive in this regard.

In the face of information (which sometimes comes close to the so-called infotainment, or even advertising), attention should be paid not only to adjusting the actual content of a given message, but also its title or headline to ethical standards. It happens that news titles or headings imply that photos and videos would be shown (for example: "We have pictures"; "Watch the video"; "18+ video"). Here, we are dealing with the objectification of materials depicting human tragedy and making death not so much the content of such information, but rather a "commodity for sale" that Fr. Prof. A. Lewek wrote about earlier. It is important to keep in mind that the news value of human death coverage and related media presentations is not derived from sight of death or bringing death to a person at an unexpected moment.

It is also important to note that today's web users are not only viewers, but also co-creators of media. Hence the concern to align media messages with ethical standards must accompany not only coverage by institutionalized media and official journalistic messages, but also platforms that allow web users to publish content in an unofficial manner on their private channels.

The mere tragedy of the moment of a person's death does not justify making it the content of coverage made available to a general audience. In view of the inherent human inclination to satisfy curiosity (all the more so when it is aroused by increasingly intense stimuli), it is reasonable to limit the availability of photographs and video footage of tragic death solely to the relevant state authorities and possibly to persons close to the deceased.

Afterword

The truth about dying is part of human existence, which at virtually every stage and aspect thereof can become the content of media messages aimed at informing the public. The informational role of the media cannot be separated from the need to respect the dignity of the human person, including one who is dying. Contemporary media messages seem to violate the boundaries of discretion and necessity in the presentation of

audiovisual information about human death, and in the purposefulness of the message, to go beyond the realm of its informational role. It is necessary to strive for the widest possible reception of John Paul II's indications both in the sphere of the recipients' mentality and in the criteria of selecting materials included in the content of media publications, both on the part of journalists themselves and media decision-makers. Certainly, the issue of ethical standards for the coverage of death in contemporary media calls for a broad, timely, and appropriate study. Respect for human dignity (including the dignity of the deceased) in journalistic work, as postulated by the Church, John Paul II himself, and the media scholars cited above, can increasingly bring out the "potential for good" mentioned by Fr. Michał Drożdż cited above, which is present in the media, thanks to which it can contribute to the benefit of all and to reliably inform, rather than satisfy and maintain audiences by striving to combine informative and sensational coverage.

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