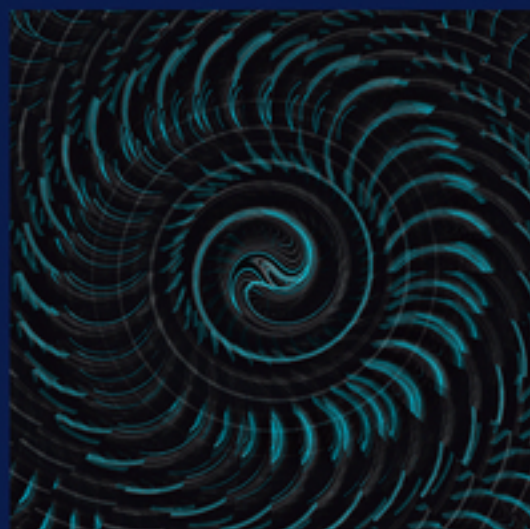Jacek Dabala

Creative Paths to Television Journalism

Introduction

The well-known ironic contention that "everybody knows all about television because everybody watches it" reflects the fact that viewers can express their opinions without any sense of humility about their lack of expertise. As a result, in media communication, the axiological and practical criteria blur, and more often than not, the journalistic profession, and professions within the communications industry in general, become caricaturised.[1] This collision of mass culture, the demands of the market, journalistic ambitions, common sense, and the hedonisation of values[2] within this particular form of entertainment, is thus worthy of attention.

The purpose of this book is to present a number of important aspects of working in television, especially from the journalistic perspective, but also from the wider perspective of media communications. In addition to evaluating the categories of television programmes in their various forms, we will draw attention to those elements and *solutions* which are rarely, if ever, discussed, as well as those which are well-known and frequently subjected to detailed analysis. The book thus attempts to discuss work in television on many levels in terms of various selected contexts. Specific television genres will be referred to frequently, but they are not the main focus of this study. The two aspects considered here—regarded by Michael Wedel, a German media historian, as the most important aspects of the work of the journalist—are the understanding of media dramaturgy, and the understanding of the art of presentation, or "transmedia narrative techniques." Both reflect not only a new maturity in approaches to the subject of audiovisual communication, but also a sensitivity to the needs of the viewers. Both have also been insufficiently explored; dramaturgy tends to be examined mainly within the field of theatre and film, while the art of presentation (included in Wedel's concept of immersive world creation) has been discussed only

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1 John Morton, "Staying Neutral," *American Journalistic Review* 12 (2010). "And the credibility of newspapers and their reporters is more important than ever in the light of the strident advocacy from left and right so prominent on talk radio and cable television and in the blogosphere. While it sometimes masquerades as journalism, that is not journalism, just a return to the advocacy rants of Colonial days."

2 Karol Klauza, "Wartości w mediach," in *W trosce o wartości*, ed. Dariusz Frydrych et al. (Drohiczyn: Kuria Diecezjalna, 2007), 13.

in the most general terms,[3] usually ignoring such aspects as complementarity, holism, or what might be described as the philosophy of screen performance. How relevant these currently unresolved issues are is suggested by numerous statements reflecting the confusion as to how the media should develop. In a review by one of the most famous American television anchors, Ted Koppel, there is talk of bridging "the old world of serious political reporting with the new kingdom of talk (…),"[4] while the columnist Greg Veis, examining the workings of cable television, notes the paradox associated with the style of communication in the conventions of "flattering monotony," imitating the British press model, and the current, often abused, TV technologies.[5] It appears that dramaturgy and the art of presenting are becoming increasingly complex, and require continuous updating. Yet it may be the case that the solutions applied previously are not completely irrelevant, and modern media communications may only appear more sophisticated, satisfying and well-understood. One might well ask how far the "kingdom of talk," with the immediacy created by its lack of boundaries, the myth of technology, the mystification of truth, eclecticism, confusion of different semantic levels, and the primacy of celebrity culture, embodies the intellectual, practical and aesthetic values which are regarded as universal. Mass media, by creating the illusion of participation and direct contact with reality, can encourage apathy and passivity while appearing to bring engagement and enlightenment. The range of challenges facing the future of television journalism is thus not ephemeral and irrelevant; it is timeless, and it is also deeply personalistic in all areas of professional competence.

Thinking about television and other media, we must take into account a number of specific aspects, often looking at the same ones from different points of view.[6] When, for example, talking about dramaturgy, many nuances of television theory and practice are immediately revealed, such as drama in language, speech and image, drama in the forms of written and spoken word, and the differences introduced into communication by specific descriptions; we are also dealing here

3   Michael Wedel, "Książka – film – DVD. Paratekstualność, konwergencja mediów i transmedialna narracja na przykładzie *Władcy Pierścieni*," trans. Krystyna Krzemieniowa, in *Kino po kinie. Film w epoce uczestnictwa,* ed. Andrzej Gwóźdź (Warszawa, Oficyna Naukowa, 2010), 198.

4   Ted Koppel, *Off Camera. Private Thoughts Made Public* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 16.

5   Greg Veis, "Blitzerkrieg," *New Republic* 5(2008): 11–13.

6   Janusz W. Adamowski, "O pilnej potrzebie formalnego powołania w Polsce nauki o komunikowaniu," *Studia Medioznawcze* 4 (2009): 23.

with the drama of shots, sets, locations, and lighting, with the dramaturgy of presenting the news or a current affairs programme, with the dramaturgy of facial expressions, gesture, timbre, tempo and the euphony of the phrases used, as well as the dramaturgy of news components, their composition, the storylines, beginnings and endings. Dramaturgy, like the art of presentation, expresses itself in a myriad of details on the borders of many disciplines, including acting, directing, philology, anthropology, philosophy, computer sciences, graphics, design, fashion, cinematography, photography, choreography, musicology, psychology, sociology, political science, statistics, geography and the law, as well as theatre studies, film studies, hermeneutics, and creative writing. These elements are part of contemporary media studies both in areas that are well-established and those requiring new approaches, transformation or expansion. Discussion and thinking about television needs to be aware of this complexity, since "their [the media's] autonomous power of influence and importance in the socio-politico-economic system, as well as the constantly increasing scale and complexity of their diversity, is forcing rapid development in the field of media studies research."[7]

In this book, the latest technical developments in the media have been deliberately excluded from the discussion but, there are references to the current possibilities of television recording, transmission, equipment or software. Certainly, the new technologies are important, but not the most important; true knowledge of TV journalism develops through thinking about creative styles and their implications, rather than about the constantly changing technology. Reflecting about the universal issues as they affect journalistic practice, about the human contexts and ways of "putting the message across," is always relevant to the journalistic profession. These issues do fall within the essential textbook knowledge about the practical aspects of the profession (including frame selection, sound recording or lighting); on the other hand, the ever-changing technology is always subservient to the creativity and intelligence of programme editors and producers.

There is an obvious need for a thorough examination of television's influence, and for developing professional sensitivity in television journalism. The observations and conclusions arrived at in this book obviously cannot provide an exhaustive analysis of how television works; the intention is to take a step towards a better understanding of the world's most popular medium, and a recognition of the complexities of the work of a TV journalist. Television is an ever-changing

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7   Tomasz Goban-Klas, "Emergencja nowej dyscypliny: nauki o mediach i komunikacji społecznej," *Studia Medioznawcze* 4 (2009): 15.

medium, and this does not encourage day-to-day in-depth analysis, while media experts tend to conduct their research in isolation, distancing themselves from the subject in an effort to be as objective as possible.

Paul Attallah, an expert on communication and journalism, makes the claim that "one of the features of studies on television may be their institutional fragmentation. No discipline has claimed television exclusively as its own nor has television generated its own stable set of questions or methods. (…)."[8] Perhaps this multidisciplinary nature of the subject, and the gap between the teaching and practice of journalism, demands that we start by mastering this diversity, in order to gain confidence in the validity of the research and the means of translating the knowledge acquired into practical solutions. Maybe Attalah's suggestion that it is also important to "generate new knowledge itself and new questions"[9] will influence the academic and the journalistic communities to open up to each other. Just because this has been difficult, even impossible, to achieve in the past, does not mean that failure is a foregone conclusion.

TV and press journalists, and those who work with them, do not usually have the time to read research results or to carry out critical analyses of their efforts. Furthermore, on the fringes of the deeper theoretical and practical interest in communications we find a multi-layered nebula of press officers, PR people, directors, actors, film producers, historians, and editors of media publications.

In this context, the flow of information needed to expand the opportunities for improving skills is clearly insufficient. There is a lack of differentiation, a tendency to ignore the results of current research on media communications, and limiting one's knowledge mainly to the popular critical reviews in the press or online; there is also what might be described as resentment and mistrust regarding the need for any professional development. But the problem exists, and needs to be tackled by improving our knowledge about television at different levels, by promoting a mature understanding of the medium regardless of one's position and role, and learning to be aware of one's own professional needs (or limitations), something which, if we are honest, simply does not occur to us and, if it does, often seems irrational.

"A love of learning is the key. It is what TV journalism is all about," according to two British media experts, Robert Thompson and Cindy Malone.[10] Note,

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8   Paul Attallah, "A Usable History for the Study of Television," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 3 (2007): 339.

9   Attallah, "A Usable History for the Study of Television," 440.

10 Robert Thomson and Cindy Malone, *The Broadcast Journalism Handbook. A Television News Survival Guide* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publisher, 2004), 165.

however, the danger that those who work in television may come to view their own professionalism so highly as to disregard the possibility of making mistakes or wrongly assessing the quality of their knowledge and work. It is undoubtedly a thorny and controversial issue, but one that cannot be ignored.

The issue of educating television journalists also involves negative aspects of incorrect training. Andrew Boyd, referring to the general experience within the media, notes that: "After their programmes, most large news organizations hold a post-mortem to see what can be done to prevent mistakes recurring. Introspection can be useful in small doses, but too much criticism from above can stultify creativity, crush initiative, and install a tendency to produce safe but predictable material."[11] One logical implication of this is that the teaching of TV journalism should not be based primarily or solely on the internal assessments of television stations, which can become predictable, but should aim to extend far beyond them. Furthermore, the process of critical evaluation should be controlled and positively profiled in order not to restrict the creative potential of employees. One could even say, paraphrasing Marcin Król, a historian of ideology, that there is a need for an idealistic perspective on the assessment of the achievements, competence and skills, something very untypical in the media.[12] Such an approach towards the profession might also restrain the tendency to tolerate flawed performances, or the temptation of patronage, which result in a relativisation of values and lead to incompetence and mistakes in the selection of staff.

The education of journalists also involves a wider issue of its perceived value. In spite of the existence of many departments of journalism at universities all over the world, opinions about their effectiveness and usefulness often still reflect a variety of fixed stereotypes and mental shortcuts.

One of the main problems here is, partially, that the journalists themselves mistrust this education. This applies especially to those who did not graduate in journalism but in something else, and who have gained their journalistic skills through practice. Many make mistakes precisely because they did not study the subject, and working in this profession, even at a very high level, does not preclude fallibility. An additional problem lies in the fact that experienced journalists are sometimes not aware of the fact that they make mistakes, and they rarely, if ever, entertain such a possibility. If their programme is well received, it seems automatically to equate to being the best way of handling the issue. Only the

11 Andrew Boyd, *Broadcast Journalism. Techniques of Radio and Television News* (Oxford: Focal Press, 2001), 137.

12 Marcin Król, "Świętość potrzebna codziennie," *Dziennik*, April 3, 2010, accessed April 4, 2010, http://www.dziennik.pl/opinie/article580355.

most experienced and the most open to change realise that, in each and every case, their work could be improved, and that it makes sense to be always honing their skills.

Undoubtedly studying journalism provides a basic experience and knowledge of the profession—after all, this is the purpose of education in general. Yet, according to Betty Medsger, former Dean of the Department of Journalism at Columbia University, the scale of the problem is still significant: "There is still an awful lot of people without an education in journalism who enter and get a job."[13] The existence and scale of the problem is all too often minimised, particularly by journalists without specialist studies who are, nevertheless, working in the profession. Although one can understand why people defend this position, logic dictates that journalism graduates should be given preference in employment, while not, of course, closing the door on the most gifted graduates of other disciplines. It is much quicker and easier to train someone who has already received a solid foundation in a profession (both theoretical and practical) than someone who has no idea about the basics and who is therefore starting from the very bottom. In the words of Howard Kurtz, a media critic and journalism graduate, 'it cannot hurt.'[14] Some journalists admit that they consider the assessments and the requirements of teachers of journalism to be more demanding than those of editors. Perhaps then this sceptical attitude to graduates of journalism and academic lecturers reflects a fear of continuous assessment at a level that is too high, too independent and objective. But perhaps, while maintaining an appropriate balance between theory and practice, there is also an unacknowledged desire for the education of journalists by media experts becoming the norm, in order to improve the quality of the media, with neither side regarding itself as special. Ben Viccario, another media critic, notes provocatively that "[the] thinking that permeates journalism is devoid of contact with the modern world."[15] The very format imposed on communication itself may at times be less than sensitive to the environment, and hide the danger of journalists only seeming to participate in, and report on, the world, the continents, countries, regions, cities or villages.

Another important goal of this study is to argue for the importance of "scholarly thinking" in journalism,[16] in order to bring awareness, primarily (but not

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13 Kevin Whitelaw, "Is j-school worth it?," *News & World Raport* 11 (1996): 3.

14 Whitelaw, "Is j-school worth it?," 3.

15 Ben Viccario, "Urgently needed in TV news: the anime factor," *Performing Arts & Entertainment in Canada* 4 (1995): 1.

16 Jacek Dąbała, *Horyzonty komunikacji medialnej* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2006), 9.

only) to television journalists, that the development of the medium which uses images depends (contrary to popular opinion) on the intellectual level of its creators, and it is owing to this intellectual level that major television projects are created, including those usually associated with popular entertainment. One of the most famous and respected American journalists, an authority on journalistic interviews, Lawrence Grobel, writes "So: Read. Watch. Be curious. Feed your brain. Knowledge is a good thing. (…)."[17] The importance of media education so understood can be appreciated when incorrect information gets out of control, when it cannot be effectively corrected or changed even though it was false and should never have been released in the first place. This disdain for scholarly thinking, for a critical and insightful approach, this disregard for the intellectual potential of journalism, can lead to irreversible errors and the perpetuation of simplistic stereotypes. On the one hand, journalism tries to reach out to the widest possible mass audience, yet at the same time, this audience imposes a style of thinking which can easily lead to spreading not only false information, but negative social emotions. There is a need for deeper analysis of these interrelationships; perhaps, following the suggestion of Edgar Morin, a French culture and media scholar, we need more scientific syncretism, which could "try to connect (…) the two sectors of the industrial culture: the information sector and the fantasy sector."[18] Such an approach is needed to reveal the practical and theoretical challenges which, in television, include linking dramaturgy and the art of presenting with a skilful balance of information and fantasy.

In methodological terms, the conclusions drawn here are based on an analysis of selected works by researchers in media and social communication, as well as professionals and media critics, some of whom have been, or still are, actively working as journalists. Most of our observations are based on a qualitative analysis of various genres of television programmes, both Polish and foreign. Selected stations from Poland, Europe, Russia, Asia, the Arab countries and the United States were taken into consideration. The analysis focuses on the problems outlined in individual chapters, with particular emphasis on dramaturgy and the specific features of journalism directly related to working in the visual media. The critical viewing of many hours of selected news and current affairs programmes produced by various stations and authors, followed by a comparative analysis, led to the identification of the main issues. It is hoped that, with all its

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17 Lawrence Grobel, *The Art of the Interview* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004), 117.
18 Edgar Morin, "Masowy odbiorca," in *Nowe media w komunikacji społecznej w XX wieku*, ed. Maryla Hopfinger (Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2002), 574.

limitations, the perspective presented here will benefit both those interested in the practical aspects of journalism and a considered assessment of media work, and those whose work involves frequent contact with the media and who would simply like to understand it better. This study, therefore, offers a particular view of the practical aspects of television and their axiological consequences, without claims to definitive conclusions or unique solutions. Modern media research employs varied methodologies, a fact emphasised and regarded as natural by a number of scholars: "At the heart of the debate over the 'right' way to conduct research in international media studies there is a positive approach which *decomposes* the mainstream of social science, and the critical approach towards cultural studies."[19] Clearly, the breadth and complexity of the subject rules out there being one satisfactory approach; rather, it involves proposals of scholarly and convincing interpretations of a particular reality, and "the energy of research can be effectively directed towards the problems of comparative and global media practice."[20] In addition to the broader context, we can clearly see here the importance of basic media practice and thus journalism at its most specific and detailed. Hence, research must take into account a variety of perspectives and approaches, from the phenomenological and hermeneutical, through structuralist studies (derived, for example, from literature and film studies), to studies of communication which are closer to sociology, political science or psychology, referred to by Jostein Grisprud, a Norwegian media expert, as "the intellectual work of wide interests."[21] In addition, there is also an attempt here to examine the most difficult aspect of the issue, i.e., the link between what can be calculated statistically and that which is beyond quantitative analysis; what Regis Debray described as an attempt to combine that which is 'material' with that which is 'spiritual.'[22]

It is not the aim of this book to examine specific programmes; the method adopted here consists, in the first stage, in identifying, ordering, naming and classifying the phenomena observed on television, while analysis and interpretation are the object of the second stage. This means that we can focus on

19 Divya C. McMillan, *International Media Studies* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007), 184.

20 McMillan, *International Media Studies*, 184.

21 Helle Sjøvaag and Hallvard Moe, "From Fermentation to Maturity? Reflections on Media and Communication Studies?" An Interview with Todd Gitlin, Jostein Gripsrud & Michael Schudson, *Journal of Communication* 3(2009): 133.

22 Regis Debray, *Wprowadzenie do mediologii*, trans. Alina Kapciak (Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2010), 83.

specific yet generally applicable observations, including errors and characteristic solutions, without assigning them to particular programmes, stations or media cultures cited in hundreds of footnotes. An analysis of news and current affairs programmes, as well as TV entertainment, opens up a much fuller professional horizon, bringing us closer to suggesting, perhaps even formulating, rules which might be useful in the work of a journalist. When trying to avoid the traditional statistical approach, one faces an additional difficulty, that of the fluidity of this type of analysis[23] when dealing with a media stream which runs parallel on multiple channels. The phenomenological-structuralist method employed here[24] was particularly useful since, on the one hand, it allowed us to account for specific collections of sample material in terms of the researcher's response to the research material, and, on the other, as a separate task, to analyse selected works, unique events and incidental phenomena which may be important in illustrating significant content or tendencies, or the value of uniqueness as such. The methodological difficulties involved in capturing data by a quantitative and (partly) qualitative approach have been noted by Roger D. Wimmer and Joseph R. Dominick, editors of one of the most important contemporary textbook of media analysis. They point to the impossibility of recording all TV material and, as a consequence, the need for other solutions, such as sample selection at the level of genre and not that of the programme; this opens up new possibilities for analysis based on the researcher's own competence.[25] Yet another methodological complication stems from the question of the relevance of each edition of a given programme, despite the clear framework of its genre. Here—in contrast to typical quantitative research—the frequency of each case had to be treated differently, i.e., samples had to contain more cases. Objective qualitative findings had to be arrived at via quantitative analysis involving large numbers of cases.

Some references to the internet may be out of date and could be replaced by other examples, but this does not affect the relevance of the analysis offered here, since they are still available and retrievable. This material, particularly examples taken from the internet, reflects the multiplying effect typical of the media, where specific examples (such as the pitfalls faced by a media presenter) appear briefly and are quickly replaced by new images of a similar character.

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23 Thompson and Malone, *The Broadcast Journalism Handbook*, 129. "Statistics are a great device, but it is important to keep in mind that it can be very misleading."

24 Walery Pisarek, *Wstęp do nauki o komunikowaniu* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, 2008), 243.

25 Roger D. Wimmer and Joseph R. Dominick, *Mass media Research: An Introduction* (Wardsworth: Cengage Learning, 2011).

The range of various TV offerings, starting from 2005, included in the research, was part of the methodology. This involved identifying for analysis the majority of well-known and respected Polish and foreign programmes or channels. This range of "message creation" over a period of five years, including both content and form, made it possible to see parallels, similarities and differences, as well as to make sense of the world in the work of different media and different journalists. This attempt at capturing practical and axiological issues by tracking television programmes over several years (at different times of day and night) *in statu nascendi* did not exclude analyses of particular programmes themselves, although they formed a smaller part of this study.

Sophisticated thinking about television involves so many levels of reflection that none of them can be regarded as comprehensive. On the one hand, we have the huge prospects for media studies with all their potential lines of research exploration; on the other, the journalistic context embedded primarily in continuously evolving practice. Among the many directions of research into media communication we can identify both the more general ones and those very detailed and specific ones that appear to be closed, and do not seem worth further investigation. When we think about the mechanisms involved in creating television programmes, we ask ourselves the same questions as do the thousands who work in the media on a day-to-day basis, and we can see the effects of their actions on the screen. These effects may be unsettling, they may differ from our expectations or tastes, or they may delight us and reinforce our belief that the programme was well-produced. All such responses should inspire both the author and the researcher to deeper theoretical and practical analyses.

However we approach the analysis of journalistic practice, there is always room not only to correct mistakes, but also to improve even the recognised media successes. Television changes as quickly as the expectations of the viewers, and today's editorial preferences age at the same pace as new varieties of programmes are born, as well as new technologies.[26] When each programme or each format forces its creators to look for new solutions in order to provide original and surprising stimuli to attract the audience, the scale of the challenge is clearly enormous.

The field of research, therefore, extends from the importance of dramaturgy, through the exploration of sound, speech and image, the problems of objectivity, accountability and independence, to the specific issues relating to the work of

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26 See: Al Tompkins, *Aim for the Heart. Write, Shoot, Report, and Produce for TV and Multimedia* (Washington: CQ Press, 2012).

a presenter, including gender issues. This field also corresponds to what James Bennett, an English media expert, described as the need to provide "social values" and "civic and cultural teaching and evaluation."[27] In this volume, the author examines the field of television in the framework of classic textbooks and influential writings of media specialists, and contrasts them with his own experience both as a researcher and a journalist/media presenter, with a career spanning nearly fifteen years behind him. One might even say that without such a personalised perspective a discussion of television would be incomplete and limited. One's own experience, including the mistakes, may well be helpful in trying to identify and assess the vital practical aspects of communication and contribute to highlighting the most important practical and theoretical horizons of the media.

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27 James Bennett, "Television Studies Goes Digital," *Cinema Journal* 3 (2008): 160.