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The characteristics of game shows broadcast on Polish public television

Charakterystyka teleturniejów emitowanych w polskiej telewizji publicznej

ABSTRACT

The increasing competition in the media industry, the changes in viewer habits, and the viewers' demand for infotainment have an impact on all television genres. The news, current affairs programmes, and even documentaries have all undergone massive changes. The aim of the paper is to take a closer look at the changes that the game show, a specific genre of tv programme, has undergone so far. A presentation of the history of the game show and of the programmes currently on polish public television as well as an analysis of selected tv programmes are intended to indicate the contemporary status of game shows.

KEYWORDS:

television, entertainment, game show

ABSTRAKT

Wzrost konkurencji na rynku mediów, zmiana nawyków odbiorczych i zapotrzebowanie odbiorców na inforozrywkę nie pozostają bez wpływu na wszystkie gatunki telewizyjne. Przeobrażeniom ulegają przede wszystkim: serwisy informacyjne, programy publicystyczne, a nawet reportaże. Celem tekstu jest przyjrzenie się transformacjom, jakim podlegał teleturniej, specyficzny gatunek programów telewizyjnych. Przybliżenie historii teleturnieju, obecnej oferty programowej polskiej telewizji publicznej oraz analiza wybranych programów, pozwolą na określenie współczesnej kondycji gatunku.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:

telewizja, rozrywka, teleturniej

In its basic meaning, a game show – in accordance with the definition in the *Dictionary of Foreign Words* (scientific editor: Irena Kamińska-Szmaj) – is "a TV programme in the form of a contest, the participants of which, gathered in the studio, answer questions in various fields."¹ However, this definition, especially today, turns out to be too narrow. The authors rightly notice that a synonym for this term

¹ <http://portalwiedzy.onet.pl/100017,,,teleturniej,haslo.html> (accessed on 10 October 2012).

is a *contest*, though they limit it to a competition based on providing answers to questions. Such a definition may prove to be insufficient because it does not refer at all to other fields of competition – those based on agility or vocal skills.

This definition has been broadened with new aspects by Wiesław Godzic, in his paper *Telewizja i jej gatunki po Wielkim Bracie* [Television and its genres after *Big Brother*]: “one of the most commercial genres: on the one hand, clearly directed towards a particular audience, and on the other (...) cheap to produce and easy to adjust to various cultural conditions.”² The author presents game shows as a certain *commodity* which functions on the media market and is designed for defined target groups (and programmed for them).

Leaving aside the market conditions, it is worth paying attention to the lexeme “game show”, which is striking in its construction at first sight: it is, above all, a *game*, which is a *show* that is remote. All games, irrespective of their type – for example, a chess tournament, sporting match, or knightly jousting tournament – assume competition and mutual rivalry. Holding a remote game is enabled by television, that is, a medium which allows viewers who are not participants of the events to become the audience to the events.

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² Godzic 44.

enabled by television, that is, a medium which allows viewers who are not participants of the events to become the audience to the events.

While characterizing game shows, it is necessary to refer to certain keywords and to use them as possible directions for analysis. Therefore, in this field there are notions such as casting calls, contestants, hosts, audiences, rules of the game, tasks, and prizes. The relationships between these elements are presented in Figure 1.

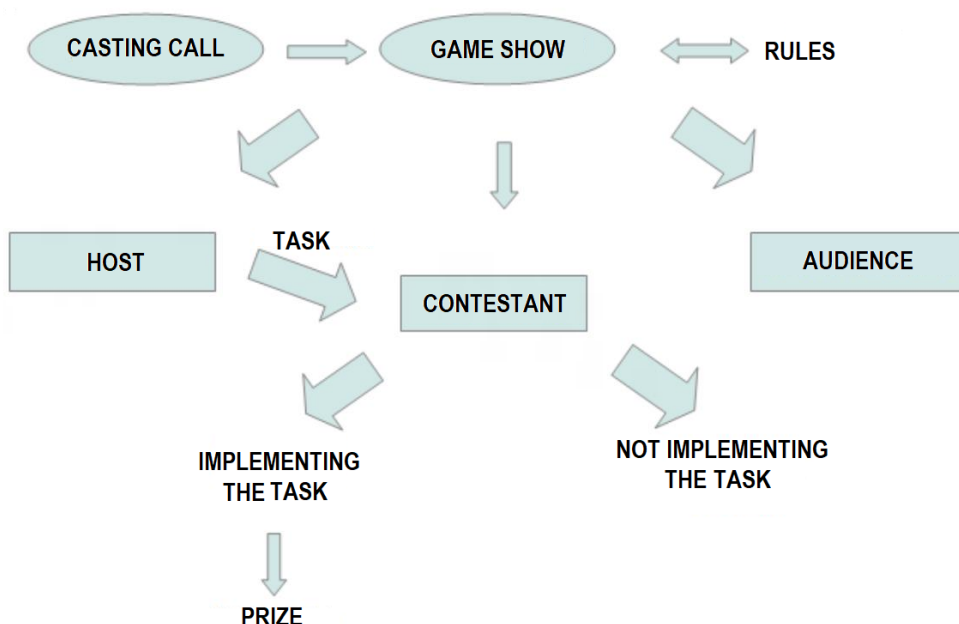


Figure 1. The elements of game shows

The casting call may be defined as a pre-game-show, i.e. the stage preceding the contest which is broadcast. The aim of the casting call is to select the contestants who will take part in the programme. Nowadays, in many game shows it is common to invite celebrities to participate in the programme (most frequently on special occasions³). The game show itself divides the people who are somehow associated with it into three groups: the hosts (usually one person), the

³ The special occasions in the case of the game shows broadcast on public TV (e.g. *Name That Tune*) could be Christmas editions, in which the contestants are famous persons and the prizes are donated to charity.

contestants (invited to the studio when they pass the casting call phase, or because they are a celebrity), and the audience, both in the studio and in front of their TV sets. An important element of this reality, which is created for the needs of the programme, is the rules of the game which, on the one hand create this fictional world, and on the other hand would be useless without this world, because every game show establishes its own set of rules.

The course of the game show is defined by the hosts and the contestants, without which the programme would not exist. In accordance with the rules of the game, the hosts set the *tasks* which the contestants are asked to perform. The task may vary in nature, from providing an answer to a question which tests their knowledge or ability to make associations to performing a musical piece. Irrespective of the nature of the task, the most important thing is that the contestant performs it correctly. In the end of such a course of events, there is usually a *prize*, which is not awarded if the task is performed incorrectly.

A BIT OF HISTORY

The need for fun, entertainment, or an escape from our everyday life is a natural human need. A perfect example of searching for a different world is Carnival, which proves that each of us needs at least a little break from what usually surrounds us in our lives. As noted by Wojciech Dudzik, “if the world, as it is, was the best possible one, people probably would not need Carnival to be happy.”⁴ An even more explicit example is ludology, which “emerged as a discipline of scientific research in response to the increase of the importance of and the interest in computer games; however, the theories and methods elaborated by ludology may serve for analysing various kinds of games and play which we observe in contemporary cultures.”⁵ The works which were of huge significance for the development of this field of research were *Homo Ludens* by Johan Huizinga and the extension of this book, *Man, Play and Games* written by Roger Caillois in the 1940s.⁶ Contemporary evidence for the need for entertainment is the schedule offered by the major TV stations, which to a significant degree are composed of entertainment

⁴ Dudzik 107.

⁵ Bomba.

⁶ Szablowska.

programmes. Interestingly, the entertainment function appeared quite early in the typologies of the functions of the media. For example, it was not yet present in Harold D. Lasswell's concept from 1948, but it did appear eleven years later in the typology by Charles R. Wright (1959).

According to Wiesław Godzic, a game show, also referred to as a *quiz show*, is a natural extension of guessing game contests which were popular during town and village festivals in the past.⁷ The show which is considered to be the first representative of the genre is *Spelling Bee* (1938), which was broadcast by the BBC. The contestants on the programme had to demonstrate the ability to spell out difficult words. In the 1950s the number of game shows on American television increased significantly; they also started to appear in the schedules offered by TV stations in other countries.⁸

In the 1960s the number of game shows started to increase, but the element which still remained more important than the attractive form was the content, because – according to the authors – the basic aim of these programmes was to increase the level of general knowledge of the audience. Even back then, Western patterns were implemented, the result of which was the appearance of, for example, *The \$64,000 Question* (1962).

As Piotr Drzewiecki pointed out, game shows appeared in Poland in the 1960s.⁹ The first Polish quiz show was the programme *Zgaduj-zgadula – Tele-Warszawa*, which was first broadcast in January 1957. The contestants were asked to answer questions, which were criticised by publicists for their “eclecticism

⁷ Godzic 44.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Drzewiecki.

(...), the unclear principle of their selection and of their division into difficulty levels.”¹⁰ Over time, the gradual shift away from one model represented by this programme – *a fun quiz* – resulted in the change of the name of the programme to *a game show* and in the appearance of the first game show, by Czechoslovakian TV, entitled *Kto, co?*¹¹ In the 1960s the number of game shows started to increase, but the element which still remained more important than the attractive form was the content, because – according to the authors – the basic aim of these programmes was to increase the level of general knowledge of the audience.¹² Even back then, Western patterns were implemented, the result of which was the appearance of, for example, *The \$64,000 Question* (1962).¹³ In that period, two types of game shows dominated: those based on knowledge (e.g. *The \$64,000 Question*) and programmes which also tested the participants’ ability to calculate or to make associations (e.g. *Asocjacje, Kółko i krzyżyk*, or *Śladami Pitagorasa*).¹⁴ In the 1970s, many forms of rivalry emerged, which were based on an ideological or political message.¹⁵ The formula of the game show also started changing: “The new aesthetics resulted in the fact that the minimalist forms which were present until then started acquiring theatrical panache. More and more frequently, the rivalry was accompanied by an audience, and the breaks in the competition were filled with performances by artists.”¹⁶ A lack of interesting new ideas contributed to the decreasing popularity of these forms in the 1980s.¹⁷

A way of coping with the lack of original ideas is to seek out foreign patterns. Piotr Drzewiecki believes that

currently, Polish television networks less frequently invent their own forms and prefer to use ready, Polonised versions of mainly American programmes. The advantage of those TV formats is the fact that their creators have verified and are familiar with the viewers’ interest in a given programme, the size of the audience, and the

¹⁰ Kozieł 42.

¹¹ Ibidem 43.

¹² Ibidem 100.

¹³ Ibidem 100.

¹⁴ Ibidem 100–101.

¹⁵ One example is the series *My 74*, the aim of which was to demonstrate the political maturity of members of organisations and to test social and political knowledge (Ibidem 176).

¹⁶ Ibidem 176.

¹⁷ Ibidem 256.

estimated proceeds from advertisements. A network purchases the right to broadcast a programme together with written guidelines regarding the way of using it; naturally, also with an estimate of the costs and profits.¹⁸

Examples of such programmes include *Jeden z dziesięciu* [Fifteen to One], *Familiada* [Family Feud], or *Va banque* [Jeopardy!], “the audience of which in the United States and Great Britain reached several million viewers.”¹⁹

GAME SHOWS ON POLISH TELEVISION (TVP)

The subject of interest of the present paper is the game shows broadcast on Polish Television (TVP). On the website www.tvp.pl, one can find a list of the game shows the station offers. In such a short paper it is impossible to analyse all fourteen game shows; therefore, they shall only be listed (together with a short note based on the descriptions from the website). Subsequently, the paper more closely presents several selected programmes.²⁰

- *Kocham Cię Polsko* [I Love My Country] – first broadcast on 13 March 2009 (TVP2). The host is Maciej Kurzajewski. The contestants are divided into two teams, each consisting of four people, which compete in various disciplines (elements of a quiz or musical puzzles). The aim of the programme is to test the participants’ knowledge about Poland.
- *Postaw na milion* [The Money Drop] – the first episode was broadcast on 5 March 2011 (TVP2). There are two contestants who are related to each other, eight questions, and one million PLN to be won. This is an example of a game show in which knowledge alone is not enough; one also needs luck. The host is Łukasz Nowicki.
- *Jeden z dziesięciu* [Fifteen to One] – since 6 June 1994, in every episode, hosted by Tadeusz Sznuć, ten contestants test the level of their knowledge. It is a classic example of a game show, in which the task is to answer the questions that are asked.

¹⁸ Drzewiecki.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ The listed game shows are discussed based on the information which may be found on www.tvp.pl and on the official websites of particular programmes.

- *Wiesz, co dobre* – a contest associated with the *Wiesz, co dobre* movie series. On the website of Polish Television the following information is available: “13 film hits and 13 opportunities to win a set of guidebooks from the Pascal publishing company. How to get it? There is nothing simpler than that, just answer three questions referring to the next film on our website. The winner will be randomly selected from the people who vote. Take part in the fun!”²¹
- *Gilotyna [L'Eredità]* – a programme broadcast since 5 October 2009 (TVP2). The host is Roman Czejarek, who accompanies the contestants in solving puzzles.
- *Jaka to melodia? [Name That Tune]* – a game show based on testing knowledge in the field of music. It was first broadcast on 4 September 1997. Three contestants compete with each other, trying to guess the names of musical pieces. The host of the programme is Robert Janowski.
- *Gotowi na ślub* – Piotr Pręgowski checks which of three couples planning their wedding is ready to get married.
- *Wielka draka o dzieciaka!* – a programme hosted by Wojciech Jagielski and broadcast since 18 September 2010; adults and their children compete to win valuable prizes.
- *Dzieciaki górą [The Kids Are All Right!]* – a game show broadcast since 12 September 2008 on the channel TVP2. The contestants form two teams – one of adults and one of children – have to answer questions and solve quizzes and puzzles. The host of the programme was Tomasz Kammel, who was later replaced by Marzena Rogalska.
- *300% normy* – a game show first broadcast on 7 September 2008 and hosted by Maciej Orłoś. It tested the contestants' knowledge about life in the times of the Polish People's Republic.
- *Familiada [Family Feud]* – the game show has been broadcast on TVP2 since 17 September 1994. Two teams of five people each guess the answers previously given by a surveyed group. The host is Karol Strasburger.
- *Koło Fortuny [Wheel of Fortune]* – the first episode was broadcast on TVP2 on 2 October 1992. The task of the three contestants was to select letters and guess word puzzles. The prize depended on the titular “Wheel of Fortune”, which also included a “Bankrupt” field.

²¹ http://www.tvp.pl/rozrywka/teleturnieje?id=&sort_by=POSITION&sort_desc=false&start_rec=0&li-sting_mod=&wit_h_video=false.

- *Ona i On – wojna płci* – it was first broadcast on TVP2 in 2006. Two teams – a male team and a female team – compete with each other; the host is Beata Sadowska.
- *Wielki Poker* [PokerFace] – first broadcast on 16 March 2007, the game show was hosted by Cezary Kosiński and Paweł Burczyk and was an example of a programme which proves that cleverness, reflexes and bluffing may be more important than knowledge.

This review of game shows from the website of Polish Television is very brief, which is the consequence of both the limitation of this paper's length and the fact that it is unnecessary to analyse all the programmes in depth. However, it is worth recalling all the titles in order to be aware of their diversity in terms of both the tasks set for the contestants and the types of skills which can bring them success.

The most frequent type of games used by game shows is undoubtedly *agon*, which is based on rivalry and competition understood in a broad sense; "it demonstrates the nature of a competition, i.e. fighting in the conditions of an artificially created equality of chances which allows the antagonists to compete in an ideal situation, thanks to which the advantage gained is strictly measurable and indisputable."

GAMES AND PLAY

In one of my earlier articles I analysed the TV schedule of the channel Polsat according to the theory of games and play by Roger Caillois.²² Roger Caillois – a French anthropologist who became famous thanks to titles such as *Człowiek i sa-*

²² Barczyk.

crum [Man and the Sacred], *Ludzie a gry i zabawy* [Man, Play, and Games], or the collection of essays *Odpowiedzialność i Styl*²³ – classified games and play, dividing them into four categories. The researcher, himself, once wrote that “games and play are so numerous and diverse that initially we doubt whether it is possible to find some principle for division which will allow them to be separated into several distinct categories.”²⁴ However, he finally managed to create a typology of four categories: *agon*, *alea*, *mimicry*, and *ilinx*.²⁵ Each of these games has a characteristic feature. The theory Caillois developed seems to be a good tool for analysing game shows and for reflecting on the types of games he differentiated, which these game shows may represent.

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This game show, hosted by Tadeusz Sznuć, is a multi-phase competition. Ten contestants take part in three rounds (in each round the number of contestants is reduced), the aim of which is to find the best contestant. The rules of the game are simple: they can be derived from the common rule of “third time lucky” because the contestants have three “lives” (represented by three lights at each contestant’s podium). A correct answer results in points, while no answer or a wrong answer causes one of the lights to go out. The aim of the first round – in which

²³ Caillois, “*Człowiek i sacrum*” 5.

²⁴ Idem, “*Żywioł i ład*” 307.

²⁵ Idem, “*Gry i ludzie*”.

²⁶ Idem, “*Żywioł*” 310–311.

²⁷ Ibidem 311.

²⁸ Ibidem 312.

the contestants are consecutively asked two questions each – is to recognize the capabilities of the contestants and provide them with, in the words of Caillois, “conditions of an artificially created equality of chances”. Providing a correct answer to at least one of the questions guarantees advancement to the next round. In the second round, the seeming equality of chances is upset because the number of questions which have to be answered by each of the contestants varies: the contestant who manages to answer a question correctly nominates the contestant for the next question. There may be various motivations for that choice, but most likely the aim is to eliminate the strongest rivals. The final round of the game show is based on similar principles.

The field of competition between the programme’s contestants is the knowledge they possess. It is worth underlining that this is general knowledge (although sometimes very detailed). The questions posed to the contestants are concrete and unambiguous, and every question is preceded by an indication of the category to which it belongs: for example, “Music – In which century did Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart live?” or “Zoology – Are amphibians and reptiles cold-blooded or warm-blooded?” (sometimes the form of the question requires the contestant to choose the correct answer from two proposed options), or “History – Was Napoleon II the son of Napoleon Bonaparte?”

Jeden z dziesięciu [Fifteen to One] is a game show which has been broadcast on the channel TVP2 for nearly twenty years now. Despite the passage of time, during which the trends dominating the media market have made public television more and more similar to commercial stations and the producers of programmes more and more willing to closely follow the path of infotainment²⁹ and to deliver to viewers what Pierre Bourdieu calls cultural “fast-thinking”, “cultural *fast-food* – already digested (...) food”,³⁰ this game show has not undergone significant transformations. The studio has been redecorated several times since 2010 and some questions are illustrated with passages of music,³¹ but the formula of the programme has remained the same.

²⁹ *Infotainment* is a portmanteau word of information and entertainment. The person who is considered to have coined the term is Ron Eisenberg, who used it in the magazine *Phone Call* in 1980. <http://www miesiecznik.znak.com.pl/jagodzinski561.html>. Accessed 30 September 2012.

³⁰ Bourdieu 57.

³¹ http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeden_z_dziesi%C4%99ciu. Accessed 14 October 2012.

The second type of games mentioned by Caillois is *alea*, or gambling with fate. This category, therefore, includes games in which an important role is played by *chance*. *Alea* is based on “a decision which does not depend on the player, and which he or she cannot in any way influence, so that the aim here is not so much winning against an opponent, but against fate.”³² The best example is *Koło Fortuny* [Wheel of Fortune], which proves that fortune is fickle.

This game show, broadcast in Poland since 1992, “was the first game show in Polish television which was produced under a foreign licence. The originator of introducing this game show in Poland was Wojciech Pijanowski, who became the programme’s host.”³³ In contrast to *Jeden z Dziesięciu* [Fifteen to One], in this programme there was a change of the host (Pijanowski only played this role until 1995). Besides the host, there are three contestants in the studio who compete with each other, but also with fate, symbolized by the titular *Wheel of Fortune*. The selection of letters which are supposed to help them guess the word puzzle is preceded by randomly drawing a prize; this prize may be awarded for guessing a letter.

Such rules of the game demonstrate that knowledge is not required from the contestants. Their answers are based on their selection of an appropriate letter of the alphabet, so they in fact have got 32 options. Even while guessing the word puzzle, the elements that are necessary more than knowledge are perceptivity, reflex, and luck. One also needs to be lucky while drawing a prize, especially because the wheel also holds a “Bankrupt” field. Therefore, *Koło Fortuny* [Wheel of Fortune] is a game in which chance plays an important role. It is an example of *alea*, a game which “shows who is favoured by fate.”³⁴

While looking at all the types of game shows, it is difficult to find programmes which represent *mimicry* or *ilinx*. Actually, it is only possible to mention certain elements of these games which appear in certain game shows. *Mimicry*, i.e. a game which “assumes the temporary adoption of – if not illusion (...) then, in any case, a world which is closed, mutually agreed and, to some extent, fictional”,³⁵ is based on mimicking, playing a role, or pretending something. “The pleasure is based on the fact that one is someone else or is regarded as someone else.”³⁶ Mimicking

³² Ibidem p. 314.

³³ Ferfecki.

³⁴ Caillois, “*Żywioł*” 315.

³⁵ Ibidem 318.

³⁶ Ibidem 321.

and dressing up are frequently associated with special costumes or accessories. Mimicking a different reality justifies a lack of rules because it dispenses the player from all rules, except for one – the rule of the *make-believe world*. An element of mimicking may be found in the game show *300% normy*, in which Joanna Jeżewska pretended to be various famous women: TV presenters, singers, or actresses.³⁷ *Ilinx*, in turn, is a game which aims to arouse feelings of daze, euphoria, or rapture. This category of games “aims to lead the participant to achieve a kind of spasm, trance, or rapture, as a result of which the rules of reality suddenly stop applying.”³⁸ Examples mentioned by Caillois include dancing dervishes, acrobatics, or a roundabout. The participants of some game shows, for example *Kocham Cię Polsko* [I Love My Country], are able to lose themselves in music or dance. However, it would be difficult, and probably impossible, to indicate a programme which is wholly based on *ilinx*.

CONCLUSIONS

Even a brief look at the programmes listed on the website of Polish Television in the Teleturnieje [Game Shows] tab may cause slight concern which, over time, transforms into the question of whether every programme presented there is truly a game show. In the case of many of them, the much more relevant term is *a show*. This problem was mentioned in the work by Wiesław Godzic, who pointed out that

a noticeable tendency in contemporary game shows is to mix mixing the classic *game show* or *quiz show* with the tradition of the American *variety show*. In the British game shows *Families at War* or *Shooting Stars* the principles of the game show are strictly associated with conversations with a star, sketches, stage jokes, and the postmodern tradition of including the clips or people from other TV programmes.³⁹

Such elements may also be found these days in Polish game shows, even those broadcast on public television. One example is the previously mentioned

³⁷ http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/300_procent_normy. Accessed 11 October 2012.

³⁸ Caillois, “*Żywioł*” 323.

³⁹ Godzic 47.

programme *Kocham Cię Polsko* [I Love My Country], in which the teams are formed by famous people.

The vast majority of game shows broadcast on Polish Television aim to test the contestants' knowledge. However, according to Krzysztof Łuszczek,

the knowledge in game shows is of various value. Some game shows promote academic knowledge, others popular knowledge. The viewers experience passive pleasure resulting from the contact with the "world of knowledge". It is the pleasure of a safe fight and competing with others without risk. The viewers are watching the mistakes made by the contestants, due to which their own self-esteem improves. Game shows do not encourage one to deepen one's knowledge (except for *Wielka Gra* [The \$64,000 Question]) – they are a television programme. They are co-created by the audience, both the one at the studio and the one in front of the TV set. The questions and the answers are only an addition. Valuable prizes may arouse jealousy and the belief that this is the only force powering human actions (e.g. the game shows *Żądza Pieniądza* and *Życiowa Szansa* broadcast by the channel Polsat) and the only value which makes humans happy.⁴⁰

It is also significant that this author uses the term *a show*. Contemporary television, which wants to attract viewers, is becoming attractive for them and more and more frequently takes the form of *a show* – spectacular, thrilling, and arousing emotions. Audiences are starting to be present in studios, which intensifies the emotions (such dramaturgy is not present in *Jeden z dziesięciu* [Fifteen to One], in which knowledge is more important than the spectacle); subsequent rounds are announced or prizes are handed out by beautiful hostesses; the monotonous structure of the programme, based on the question–answer principle, is enriched with more free segments that are attractive for the viewer (e.g. performances by music groups or by the host, who sings songs whose titles have appeared on *Jaka to melodia?* [Name That Tune]).

Art. 21 of the Polish Broadcasting Act of 29 December 1992 states that

Public radio and television shall carry out their public mission by providing, on terms laid down in this Act, the entire society and its individual groups with diversified programme services and other services in the area of information, journalism, culture, entertainment, education, and sports which shall be pluralistic, impartial,

⁴⁰ Łuszczek 45.

well balanced, independent, and innovative, marked by high quality and integrity of broadcast.⁴¹

The entertainment function, therefore, remains one of the basic assignments of the media. However, the following question emerges: What is and what should be the level represented by entertainment programmes? According to Drzewiecki,

in the era of the Polish People's Republic game shows were more strongly an expression of the educational mission than currently. Nowadays, the financial factor and the degree of popularity are more decisive. In free-market conditions the preservation and development of knowledge-based game shows depends on the demand of the audience.⁴²

Unfortunately, contemporarily, the so-called "average viewer" more and more frequently chooses para-documentary series and reality TV, due to which the demand for programmes which test knowledge in a traditional way is decreasing. The viewer, accustomed to colourful, flashing images, is not always satisfied by programmes based on asking questions. Where should broadcasters search for a solution, then? In media *shows* which attempt to popularise knowledge? The tendencies observed in the area of game shows – for example, the presence of celebrities, the increasing role of the dramaturgy of events, the spectacularity, or the introduction of more free segments – demonstrate that even if the evolution towards a *show* is not the best way, it may be the only one that is left.

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⁴¹ The Polish Broadcasting Act of 29 December 1992.

⁴² Drzewiecki.

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