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WORK OF A PARAMEDIC DURING THE PANDEMIC COVID-19 IN POLISH RADIO REPORTS

Abstract: The article presents the work of paramedics during the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland documented in Polish Radio reports. The recorded accounts of rescuers show the working conditions in a situation of personal threat to health and life, and at the same time a non-standard challenge for the health care system. The reports also contain numerous comments on the public perception of the paramedic's work during the pandemic. The protagonists refer to manifestations of aggression and lack of support which they experience in their environment. The broadcasts constitute one of the important aspects of the media discourse on the pandemic and the functioning of health services in Poland.

Keywords: paramedic, COVID-19, Polish Radio, radio reports, media discourse

INTRODUCTION

Paramedics are a group of health professionals who are the first to come into direct contact with patients in life and health-threatening situations. The psychological burden of knowing that you are constantly responsible for human life (Rasmus *et al.*, 2020; comp. Kulczycka *et al.*, 2014), the traumatic experience of suffering and death (Merklinger-Soma *et al.*, 2011), and the need for constant commitment make it one of the most stress-

ful medical professions (Binczycka-Anholcer, Lepiesza, 2011; Ogłodek, 2011). During the COVID-19 pandemic, this work required even greater sacrifices as a “front line” activity. At the same time, paramedics have encountered extreme public reactions – from admiration worthy of “heroes” to expressions of aggression and ostracism caused by fear of possible coronavirus infection.

On the legal side, the responsibilities of paramedics are defined by the Act of 8 September 2006 and the Regulation of the Minister of Health of 20 April 2016. In addition, during the pandemic period, new regulations came into force expanding the powers of this group. The first, dated 27 November 2020 enabling the collection of material for examination and antigenic testing for SARS-CoV-2 and dated 9 April 2021 giving paramedics the right to qualify for vaccination against COVID-19.

The daily work of paramedics is important in the society and it provides interesting material for the media during the pandemic. The analysis will use the work of paramedics based on the factual radio coverage. It is worth noting that due to the epidemiological threat, the making of radio recordings was hampered by the fact that it was impossible for the reporter to meet directly with the subjects of the material, to enter a Hospital Emergency Ward or an ambulance¹. However, thanks to the use of non-standard solutions, the determination of journalists and the cooperation of the health service, it was possible to prepare audio reports, which today have the status of a documentary record of the work of paramedics during the pandemic. The recordings will be presented in the context of a profiographic analysis aiming at an in-depth description of the specifics of the paramedic profession in the era of the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

¹ In a study commissioned by the Polish Press Agency and the Institute for Information Society Development, “journalists for whom the main medium of work is radio (average 3.67 compared to 3.03 among people working mainly in the internet portal) significantly more often admitted that they felt severely limited in direct forms of contact with interlocutors” (Tworzydło *et al.*, 2020, p. 11–12).

WORKING CONDITIONS AS REPORTED BY PARAMEDICS

The formula of radio reportage makes it possible to record and present the experiences of individual paramedics who represent the work of paramedics in general. The strength of their narrative is the personal perspective which enhances authenticity and credibility. As far as the construction of the recording is concerned, what draws attention is the presence of monologues and reportage scenes, which allow to build a perceptual impression of simultaneity and to eliminate the distance (Wójciszyn-Wasil, 2018; Białek, 2019). In this context, the reportage serves as a record of facts with a strong affective characterization, and the record of the statements of participants and witnesses allows the listener to form his own opinion on the reported events.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, radio reporters felt that the situation was so out of the ordinary that as many aspects of it as possible should be recorded: "We talked about the fact that our duty as documentalists is to work on a record of what is happening at the moment so that someone in the future could reach for it, so that a trace of it would remain" (Mickiewicz-Adamowicz, 2020). Among the recordings made there are also attempts to reach paramedics, whose reports show the functioning of the health service and patients, make the sense of danger real, help to confront common opinions undermining the existence of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, downplaying the risk of falling ill². The voice of the paramedics thus becomes both the point of view of the expert medic and the most committed participant in the fight against the pandemic. From the point of view of the concept of media material, the recording with a paramedic allows you to have a grater insight in the reality of HED – inaccessible, and thus arousing the curiosity of numerous audiences.

The use of strict safety procedures by paramedics has become a necessity in the face of the threat of coronavirus. One of the most present images in media was the use of special bio-protection overalls. The subject of Jakub Tarka's report emphasizes:

² "For example, about the functioning of the Facebook group called 'COVID-19 – a false pandemic'" write: M. Du Vall, M. Majorek (2020, p. 182).

"I remember the times while getting in an ambulance you started each shift with checking the equipment, its quantity and condition – you always opened that cabinet and looked at those overalls, and then there was the question: When will I have to wear them? What are they for? In what circumstances will I have to wear them? How catastrophic the situation should be to use them? Well, it turned out that this is everyday reality" (Tarka, 2020c).

Working in this kind of PPE – as the recorded lifeguards indicate – is not comfortable: it prevents free movement, eating or drinking water, and they have to wear it for several hours everyday. In Jakub Tarka's report, we can hear directly: "For us, staying in this suit is a huge effort: hot, stuffy and wet" (*ibidem*). Putting on protective clothing is also time-consuming and it delays the delivery of treatment to the patient. However, this necessity is obvious to paramedics: "to be as safe as possible, because it is not known what we will have to deal with" (Kwiatkowska, 2020).

A major problem during the first wave of the pandemic, in the spring of 2020 in Poland, was the inadequate supply of appropriate protective equipment, such as FFP3 masks. Healthcare workers used their own money to buy the equipment they needed: "we spent a lot of money on masks, on filters" (Tarka, 2020c). They were also looking for ideas for creating alternative personal protection, e.g. with the use of 3D printers (Kwiatkowska, 2020).

Later on, the greatest challenge was the decreasing efficiency of the health care system. It meant, for example, the long waiting time for an ambulance to take a patient to the Hospital Emergency Department. Some paramedics say: "We had to spend 4–5 hours with some patients in the Emergency Room, waiting for the treatment (...) The record holder spent 20 hours in an ambulance" (Tarka, 2020a). There were also not enough ambulances and emergency teams. The protagonist of the reportage *The Day of a Paramedic* tells the story of dramatic situations when a dispatcher in a large city desperately searches for rescuers who could answer the call. It is cruel but true that there are situations when "the dispatcher is begging" for a free team to report, as there is nobody to help a child (*ibidem*). The health

system is critically assessed not only as a result of the widespread threat of COVID-19, but more importantly of years of neglect – “the pandemic has only exacerbated this” (Tarka, 2020a).

Lifeguards do not hide the long working time (“I came back from work after 36-hour shift” [Kwiatkowska, 2020]) and mental strain (“this is frustration” [Tarka, 2020a]). The months-long, daily struggle for human life in harsh conditions means diminishing physical strength: “People are tired, medical staff are tired. I see it in my work colleagues. I feel it in myself” (Kwiatkowska, 2020). The paramedics also do not perceive their salaries as adequate to the amount of work performed. “It is not a matter of our greed,” declares the protagonist of Jakub Tarka’s recording, “it is a matter of the fact that by earning more per hour we will have the opportunity to work less. We will actually be able to buy our own time, sleep, every minute spent with family, with wife or going for a walk with friends. These are the kinds of things you start to appreciate” (Tarka, 2020c).

PUBLIC APPROACH TO THE WORK OF PARAMEDICS

The issue of public approach of the paramedic profession during the pandemic has become another important issue of the media discourse on pandemics. On the one hand, the dedication and responsibility of the medical staff was appreciated, but on the other, the fear of the possibility of SARS-CoV-2 infection resulted in aggressive behaviour³. Radio reporters managed to record the observations and feelings of paramedics regarding the wave of hate against the health service. These comments provide an important counterpoint to the public discussion of the pandemic.

First of all, the protagonists of the reports indicate that they are treated with reserve. In dealing with others, they notice anxiety and lack of kindness: “People treat me with distance, they know that I am a paramedic, that I work in an ambulance... so you can feel this emotion when you talk to someone” (Kwiat-

³ Examples of media publications on manifestations of negative behaviour towards health services: Majnusz, 2020; Markłowska-Tomar, 2020; Szmaj, Bartosik, 2020; MJ, 2020; Prus, 2020.

kowska, 2020). They are very often referred to as “the ones spreading the plague” (Tarka, 2020c), or even “murderers” (Tarka, 2020b). It happens that they are not allowed to enter a shop, or are even barked at with a dog (Bogdanowicz, 2021). In the time of lockdown, when most workers in other industries were operating remotely, there was a growing sense of being separated from the rest of the society among paramedics: “We were the only ones fighting this virus – every single person connected in some way to the health care system” (Tarka, 2020c).

In the programme “Życie na sygnale” (Life at the Signal), Jakub Tarka confronts his protagonist with an excerpt from a paradocumentary series containing a scene in which some paramedics, who arrive to help, are attacked and beaten. The journalist asks directly if such situations are facts or fiction. The response is as follows: “In social media internal groups, there are often pictures like this where rescuers show how severely they were beaten. And these are people who sometimes look as if they have been battered. I know some medical workers who were threatened by a family member [of the patient – out of AWW] with a knife in his hand behind his back and saying that if they did not save mum, dad, grandma or grandpa he would kill them” (*ibidem*).

During the pandemic, the frequency of aggressive behaviour towards medical workers increases: tyres punctured in the cars, notes left behind the window saying they are a source of infection. One of the paramedics reports: “While in a queue at a market, someone must have recognised me because I heard him talking loudly: “What is he doing here, let him (vulgarism) to the hospital, there is his place and not spreading the plague” (*ibidem*). Such situations are interpreted as a manifestation of the social frustration caused by the pandemic. The rescuers, to some extent, seem to understand the whole situation, they themselves take care of their families, they rent separate flats, they contact their loved ones online (comp. Kwiatkowska, 2020, Tarka, 2020c)⁴. However, this type of behavior deprives them of

⁴ Rescuers who live with their families during a pandemic implement their own protection procedures for fear of infecting their loved ones: “That fear was, that fear is still there. A little different, because we are

the value of their work and dedication, contributes to professional burnout, which, even before the pandemic, was high in this group of professions (comp.: Szaton, Harazin, 2013, p. 28–32; Żurowska-Wolak *et al.*, 2015; p. 43–50; Leszczyński *et al.*, 2019, p. 114–119; Crowe *et al.*, 2020, p. 6–16). The protagonists of the reports admit that, despite their young age, they have already had episodes of resigning from the post. It is significant, however that Marzena Moniuszko – the paramedic from Anna Bogdanowicz's programme – returned to work in the emergency service with the outbreak of the pandemic. Despite doubts about the risk of infection, she has come to the conclusion that this profession is her life's calling (Bogdanowicz, 2021).

Rescuers are aware of the importance of their work and its specificity. They appreciate the displays of kindness and support: the personal protective equipment donated, especially in the first wave of the pandemic: masks, disinfectant fluids or even drawings from children. They see the positive aspects of their involvement: "It is very positive work. We have a chance to make a dead man alive. It is something great. The beautiful thing is that an elderly person can sometimes, with tears in her eyes, thank us, say that we were the first people who approached her normally for six months or a year, who simply took an interest in her and cared for her. This is probably what compensates us a little bit for the stress and unpleasant emotions associated with work" (Tarka, 2020a). However, they stress that, what they see, there is a great need for systemic changes in health care, especially in the area of emergency services. "The whole situation is saved by enthusiasts" – they conclude (Tarka, 2020c)⁵. They also refer to comments questioning the existence of coronavirus and the associated health and life risks: "If anyone doesn't believe

getting used to it. I am very afraid for my wife. When I come back from duty, the first thing I do is wash up. I bag the clothes that I keep at the emergency station, hide them in such a way as to minimise the risk of transmission" (Tarka, 2020c).

- ⁵ Workload, dissatisfaction with wages and the provision of the Act of 28th May 2021 on amending the law on the manner of determining the lowest basic remuneration of certain employees employed in medical entities and certain other laws resulted in protests of this professional group at the end of June 2021. Comp. TOK FM/PAP, 2021; Raducha, 2021.

in COVID, welcome to the ambulance, welcome to the covid ward” (Tarka, 2020a). The accounts of rescuers, therefore, give credibility to the media message about the pandemic, give it an emotional value, and illustrate with specific examples a medical expert narrative.

The increase in social value and knowledge of the conditions under which emergency departments operate on a daily basis also becomes a motivation to talk to the media. The paramedics not only tell journalists about their experiences, but also record themselves in places where the reporter – for sanitary reasons – does not have access: in the ambulance, in the ED, and even during a visit to the patient’s home. In this way they become not only heroes but also co-authors of the programme. Thanks to their involvement, it is possible to document the activities of the emergency services during a pandemic in multiple ways.

SUMMARY

Media, including the group of radio reporters, got interested in the work of paramedics has increased during the pandemic⁶. The resulting recordings show how the health care system in Poland functions in the reality of the epidemiological emergency cases. The paramedics speak out about the difficulties in accessing personal protective equipment, long queues to admit patients to hospital, long hours on duty, extreme tiredness resulting from working long hours and inadequate pay for working in high-risk conditions. An important thread of the media discourse in this area is the public perception of the work of paramedics highlighting examples of distancing neighbours and acquaintances and displays of aggression. It should be added that the rescuers do note the expressions of support and solidarity that allow them to maintain the passion and commitment necessary in this profession.

⁶ Examples of realisations of this theme in other media: Onet.pl, 2020; Wrona, 2021; Źądło, 2021; TVN, n.d.; Kapusta, 2020; Szttyler-Turovsky, 2020.

As far as the construction of radio material is concerned, it is worth appreciating the tendency, unprecedented in reporter's practice, for the hero of the programme to enter the role of co-author of the narration. Due to this solution, what the listener receives is a personal, strongly affecting narrative. The advantage of radio reportage is the credibility it builds by presenting the stories of individual characters and their experiences, as well as the direct recording of events: in this case from an ambulance or hospital. This makes it possible to build a message that lends credibility to commentary and expert opinion.

The collected media materials show the work of paramedics in a wide spectrum. They also prove the significant role of the media and the reportage formula in shaping a multifaceted message about the pandemic and the functioning of the health system in Poland.

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