# No Laughing Matter

Karim Nader

If you believe the Internet, the recent murder of the UnitedHealthcare Chief Executive Officer was an excellent opportunity for cruel jokes with the hope of going viral. On Twitter, people used humor to express their lack of sympathy with the victim:

> A bullet in the chest sounds like a pre-existing condition. Sorry, no coverage. Maybe try physical therapy.

> I submitted a claim for my condolences, but it was denied. My prayers are, unfortunately, out of network.

This kind of dark humor seeped into reality when a prankster left a festive balloon at the crime scene that reads "CEO DOWN" alongside a smiling star and party poppers.



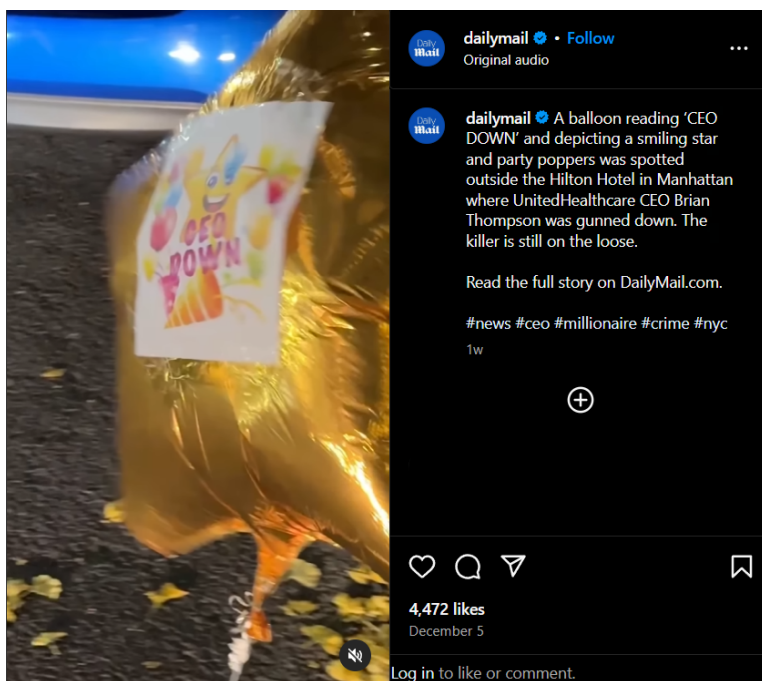Screenshot of the Daily Mail via Instagram

A man dying in a premeditated assassination in the middle of Manhattan is no laughing matter. This should not be a typical reaction to someone's death! And it is not, according to the Washington Post, which believes that social media has amplified the "crude and depraved jokes" coming from a fringe minority of Americans.[1]

It's easy to blame Internet trolls for the cruelty of some of those jokes. But that cannot be the whole story. Almost forty years ago, before the age of social networks, the Challenger space shuttle exploded on live television. I was yet to be born in 1986, but I assume that jokes were shared the old-fashioned way—orally, maybe, like a Greek epic, or printed like hieroglyphics on a stone tablet:

> What does NASA stand for? Need Another Seven Astronauts.

> Where are the astronauts spending their next vacation? All over Florida.

The Internet didn't start the fire—the Challenger jokes tell us as much—but it fans the flames by amplifying the conditions under which humor feels like an appropriate response to public disaster.

I want to take a closer look at those conditions to vindicate the Internet's sick sense of humor. Here's what I'll argue: (1) amusement requires the suspension of empathy towards the subject of the joke, (2) we are not always required to empathize with others, (3) the mass mediation of disaster makes unreasonable demands on our empathy, and (4) humor is a legitimate response to this unreasonable demand.

(1) You cannot explain a joke. It stops being one the moment you need to point out why it is funny. That is because jokes are conditional: they rely on unstated presuppositions, which can be shared attitudes between the joke-

teller and the audience. An audience must then collaborate to ensure the success of the joke by identifying this shared attitude. This can only happen when the attitude remains unstated, and the joke, unexplained.

We ought to beware, however, of those presuppositions leading us into a trap. The beliefs and attitudes upon which a joke relies can be despicable. Sexist jokes presuppose negative attitudes toward women, the UnitedHealthcare jokes entail that the victim deserved it, and the Challenger jokes evoke some pretty gory images. Thankfully, we do not need to hold those objectionable attitudes to understand offensive jokes. We have a built-in vice-free technology to appreciate humor without corrupting our morals: our imagination. All we need to understand a morally deprived joke is to imagine holding morally deprived attitudes.

It is within the limits of this imaginative exercise that we find a compelling moralist argument on the morality of humor. Ted Cohen, for example, believes that some people cannot imagine holding attitudes that are prejudicial against essential parts of who they are without "disfiguring" or "forsaking" themselves.[2] It is not only those who are excluded by prejudicial jokes who could fail to adopt those attitudes, says Tanya Rodriguez, but also anyone who properly empathizes with the victim of the joke. By putting ourselves in the victim's shoes, we understand that our amusement comes at a hefty price—the denial of the victim's self-respect.[3] Zoe Walker makes a similar point in arguing that our sense of humor can be immoral. If our sense of humor is a disposition to find certain incongruities amusing, then an immoral sense of humor is a failure to respond to immoral incongruities with a negative emotion.[4]

Those arguments echo an idea from John Morreall and Henri Bergson, who believe that amusement requires some kind of distance between the audience and the subject of the joke. Morreall argues that humor, just like aesthetic experience more generally, requires practical disengagement.[5] Or, as Bergson puts it, "the comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart."[6]

(2) That humor requires and creates distance from the subject of the joke is not sufficient for the moralist argument. What is also needed is the premise that the kind of distance that comes with amusement is always objectionable. The moralist must claim, then, that issues like racism and sexism should always make us feel practically engaged. Humorous distance is a morally objectionable failure to empathize only when empathy is required of us.

I want to push back against this idea because it is exactly in its numbing of the heart that we find the positive value of humor. This is not a new claim. Morreall writes that "humor is valuable in giving us distance and perspective" from the stream of everyday practical concerns.v More recently, David Shoemaker tells us that "joking about one's pain and suffering is a powerful way of taking back control over one's life."[7]

The point is not that we have free reign to use humor as a way to disengage from serious matters. Some situations are no laughing matter. However, it is not the content of a joke that bears on whether it is permissible or not to be amused by it. Instead, it is the context in which we find ourselves that is relevant.

There are, indeed, a number of situations in which we are not required to empathize with others. We do not always feel empathy towards vicious people when they suffer as a result of their viciousness. We might also fail to empathize with someone's affective response if it seems irrational given their situation. Adam Smith believed, contrary to some of his contemporaries like David Hume, that empathy does not arise from witnessing someone's emotion but from considering the situation that caused their affect in the first place. If their emotional response does not seem fitting, we will fail to empathize with them.

We might also find ourselves unable to engage in the emotional work that empathy requires. While we usually feel saddened when we hear about a friend's hardship, empathy is not necessarily an appropriate response when they are trying to comfort us. A story of hardship shared by a

friend can be emotionally helpful when we are going through similar hard times.[8] That is because empathy requires emotional work, and we are not expected to do that work when we are being comforted.

In humor, too, we find that empathy has its limits. A good self-deprecating joke presupposes that the negative evaluation the joke-teller makes of themselves is an exaggeration. There is no need for the audience to empathize with the joke-teller, as the affective presupposition behind the joke is not to be taken seriously. Second, members of an oppressed group often make prejudicial jokes among others who share their identity. Living under the patriarchy, under white supremacy, and dealing with discrimination in general require significant emotional labor. Because this is hard work, the temporary suspension of empathy while sharing a prejudicial joke is morally innocent.

(3) We now have a good picture of the morality of humor and can turn our attention to disaster more specifically. It seems like we are surrounded by tragedies today, not because they happen more often than they used to, but because we now have the technology to watch them occur in real-time anywhere in the world. "Were it not for the media," says Elliot Oring, "our disasters would be far fewer."[9]

Writing about television, Oring argues that the repeated airing of public disasters forces the audience to confront the horrors that are not shown. While dead and decapitated bodies are not fit for television, we can infer the details from the images of explosions and destruction. Oring also notes that the media prescribes certain attitudes from the viewer. Rhetoric about the tragedy is created and sold to the audience, who might feel like their response does not match what is prescribed to them.

For Oring, disaster jokes are a way to take control of the narrative: they make the unspeakable speakable and downplay the importance of the disaster. Jokes are the ideal tool for this task: unstated presuppositions can highlight the gruesomeness hidden from television coverage

("All over Florida"), and humor downplays the severity of the disaster by making a punchline out of it.

Forty years later, disasters remain, but the screens on which we witness them have changed. We might think that social media prevents the treatment of disasters as media triumphs by democratizing our access to information. However, we continue to make a spectacle out of tragedy. Take, as an example, the sharing of bodycam footage of Black men murdered by police officers. Some feel compelled to share those videos as proof of police brutality, which is why they often go viral. However, this occurs at a huge cost to Black people while benefiting tech and companies that profit from increased ad revenue.[10] On social media, we are prone to share what Bekka Williams and C. Thi Nguyen call moral outrage porn: representations of moral outrage that we engage with primarily to feel good about ourselves.[11]

If traditional media has turned tragedies into a spectacle, it has found a dedicated audience and an enthusiastic promoter in social media. People contribute to the prevalence of shocking content online, sometimes because they feel like they have a moral duty to expose injustice, or sometimes just because they find pleasure in expressing moral outrage.

(4) The world would be pretty grim if it were just as it seems on television and social media. Unfortunately, that is how it appears to us, as much of our knowledge is constructed by what we see on our screens. We find ourselves surrounded by tragedy, serious stuff that demands that we empathize with those who are suffering. But this is not sustainable. It is paralyzing to wallow in the misery of others. What we find, instead, is that people are quick to joke about tragic events as a way to resist the constant demand for empathy that emerges from social media.

When we joke about disasters, we adopt questionable attitudes towards the disaster itself, its victims, or the way people respond to it. Our amusement, then, is a failure to respond to tragic events with compassion. The moralist is not wrong

to argue that finding humor in tragedy requires a numbing of the heart. What is wrong, instead, is to believe that this anesthesia is immoral in and of itself.

Tragedy is not funny. At least, in an ideal world, it should not be. However, when we constantly witness the suffering of others on the news and social media, humor allows us to regulate the unreasonable demand for our empathy.

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